東京ヒーローズ

13

COUNTDOWN

あざの耕平
Kouhei Azano

ファンタジア文庫

東京ビビッドバス

COUNT>DOWN

13

ZEN

霊刀の刀身を濡らす斜陽が、
優美な光の筋を引く。

拮抗する霊気と霊気が、
両者の間の空間を軋ませるかのようだった。

「急ぎましょう！」

「ここがゴールじゃないからな。
引き際は見誤るなよ」

魂が彼岸に彷徨う。
自分が解けて、世界と混ざる。
カツ、と光が瞬いた。

現れたのは黄金の光点。
光点は、流れ、伸びて、
光の帯となり、雄大にたなびいた。

Chapter 1 - Dark Clouds Yonder

Part 1

The towering skyscraper was a high-rise office building in Roppongi Hills.

Seeing this magnificent scene, Natsume held back her aura and quietly waited for the opportunity as she looked at this magnificent scene.

As it became time for lunch, a large number of people came out from the building. But this had all been anticipated. A confusing crowd of people was more effective for escaping the eyes of others than perfection of her stealth magic. Natsume surreptitiously passed over several interlinked walkways with the crowd.

There were four people with business in Roppongi.

Natsume and Touji were easy to spot because of their aura, so they were waiting in the wings at a place very far away. They were fighters who would move to help out in an emergency. In other words, they were fighting strength there to allow their friends to escape.

Also, the main contact was Momoe Tenma. Tenma, with no distinctive features, was currently the most skilled at concealing himself from spirit-sensing abilities. Also, his aura wasn't as easy to spot as his other friends. The spirit flow in the city had been hugely chaotic since that night, and the state of aura was very unstable. The numbers of spiritual disasters were several times greater than before. That was why there was much more potential for stealthy infiltrations.

Of course, that wasn't a good thing.....

"....."

Natsume looked below the walkway. Down there at the corner of a wide road and next to a tree by the street was a temple as small as Jizo Hall[1]. It was the mechanical-type shikigami 'AR4 Guardian' of the spiritual disaster early detection sensory net. Natsume silently watched the crowd of people walking around nearby. Not only was aura unstable, but the traffic network was still in a sluggish state due to the effects of the frequent spiritual disasters, especially in Shinjuku and Kichijoji. After all, the first Phase Four in two years was a big deal.

Even Natsume had been able to clearly sense this spiritual disaster with her level of spirit-sensing. It stung her nerves. Perhaps all the Onmyouji in Tokyo's darkness had the same feeling.

"Natsume....."

Natsume heard Touji's voice. Natsume shook her head and sighed. The voice she heard hadn't come from her phone, but rather from the internet group call. These messages had been constantly coming since they had arrived here.

"A lot of people are going away over here. The situation's very serious."

Natsume checked the time. It was 12:50. The pedestrian traffic would reduce after the noon break time ended. It would be very easy to get spotted when that time came.

---

[1] A 10ft by 10ft shrine at the Shin-Yakushi-ji temple.

"I know. Retreat for now. Kyouko, perform divination again."

"Hold on."

This time was Tenma's voice. Extremely excited, he said:

"He's here, it's Kogure-san."

"Where?"

"Across from where I am. Natsume-chan, you should be able to see that convenience store, right?"

Natsume immediately moved towards one side of the walkway in the mentioned direction. A man was walking next to the bicycle lane. His ability was visible even from a distance. He was Kogure Zenjirou, one of the Twelve Divine Generals. An opponent since the night they had reunited. Natsume bit her lip, staring at him.

美容

"Tenma, can I go?"

"Wait, don't cross yet."

"Natsume, I'm a bit closer, let me go."

That voice came from the final person participating in this operation, Souma Akino.

Natsume hastily stopped her. "No, don't, you can't keep approaching him like that, you're the backup..."

"It's fine if I'm just sending a message. Just like with Tenma."

"Akino..."

Akino's aura was very easy to spot. Especially for Kogure. But she was the backup member who would help Tenma escape in an emergency. She needed to stay on standby, and couldn't be allowed to act on her own.

Natsume's eyes widened. She was extremely tense.

"Ah, wait, Tenma-kun, there's a van coming from behind."

Two vans stopped one after another in front of where Natsume was looking. Not long afterwards, two men came down. They were Divine Generals who had shown up last year at Seishuku Temple.

"It's Mystical Investigator Yamashiro and Special Senser Miyoshi."

"Ah?"

"Don't disturb the aura for now, everyone. Stay as you are and move away from this place. Akino too, okay?"

"Yeah."

"This didn't work either? Bastards!"

"Natsume-chan, maybe I should still try approaching them. If I keep watching them, there might be an opportunity to come in contact with Kogure-san."

Natsume rejected Tenma's proposal, since after all there wasn't much time. If they gave up here, who knew when they would have another opportunity like this? Fortunately, only Kogure had noticed Tenma's aura. Yamashiro and Miyoshi still hadn't noticed. They might notice him if he approached them posing as an ordinary person.

But.....

"No. Don't. The Mystical Investigators are probably familiar with your information, Tenma-kun. Those two should know you too, so you can't endanger yourself here."

There was no time, so they couldn't argue here. They needed to move carefully.

Natsume breathed deeply, issuing instructions to everyone.

"Everyone retreat, but don't panic."

Part 2

It had already been two days since the Tsuchimikado family's capture.

Natsume and the others were currently using an old warehouse as their base of operations. It seemed to be a warehouse that the Mystical Investigators had stopped using ten years ago.

"Even so, there's still someone in the Mystical Investigators who knows this. There should be related information in the reference room."

"We can still use it temporarily. But right now isn't the time to lie around. We're in a dangerous situation."

There were two floors in the warehouse, and they could see the outside scenery through the windows inside. The entire warehouse was only as large as a small gym. The most eye-catching thing in it was a giant vehicle in the middle. This was Tenma's mechanical shikigami Hama - a large vehicular-type called the 'Hama H1'. It was a high-mobility, multipurpose armored vehicle originally meant to be a military vehicle. It weighed three tons and was two meters wide and almost two meters tall. It was close to five meters long. The reason they chose this location to hide was due to Hama in the first place. If not for this warehouse, it would have been very difficult for Natsume and the others to escape the Onmyou Agency's eyes. Suzuka was next to Hama analyzing him right now. According to what Suzuka said, Hama was an incredible kind of manmade shikigami.

Natsume and Touji were on the second floor reporting to Amami. Kyouko and the kimono-wearing shikigami Suisen were also there. The atmosphere was heavier than that of the first floor.

"Sorry, I wish I made a more accurate divination."

Natsume smiled and said, "Don't worry, my stepfather also said that divination's very difficult. There's no way to fully control it in the first place."

"Just like Natsume said, I guess we were just unlucky that the other two came."

Touji shrugged and said to Kyouko.

"But if I at least divined that....."

"Just like when we were searching for Natsume-chan, you can't divine for a specific person."

"Kyouko, you've already done very well."

Natsume consoled Kyouko again.

Actually, Kyouko's abilities were already quite powerful. The accuracy of her divination this time might be able to rival Tsuchimikado Yasuzumi's. If she continued accumulating experience like this, she might grow into someone like her grandmother Kurahashi Miyo. But right now they didn't have the time to slowly accumulate experience.

"Anyways, we don't have time. There might be action again."

"Yeah."

Kurahashi Genji, the Onmyou Agency Chief, and Souma Takiko, the current leader of the Souma clan, had once secretly manipulated the Twin-Horned Syndicate from the darkness. Right now, they were trying to cause a third spiritual disaster terrorist attack. It would be held on the same day as the previous two, Hinamatsuri, or March third. It was already the twenty-seventh of February today. They only had four days left, including today. Fortunately, Natsume and the others were moving to stop the spiritual disaster terrorist

attack under Amami's leadership. Amami, who had led the Mystical Investigators in their fight against the Twin-Horned Syndicate two years ago, held extremely complex feelings. Of course, that was the same for Natsume and the others. It was hard to endure their bitterness at being toyed with, nor could they ignore it. But the matter was still extremely difficult for Natsume and the others. After all, the Onmyou Agency was planning the spiritual disaster terrorism.

"It looks like we'll have to ask for support."

It looked like they would need Harutora and Ohtomo Jin to deal with the Onmyou Agency. Those two were necessary as fighting strength. But their whereabouts were still unknown.

"Both Harutora and Ohtomo should know that the Onmyou Agency's plotting something. Honestly, what are those two doing at such an important time?"

In the worst case, if those two still haven't contact us the day of, we'll have to make an emergency decision on our own."

"The most effective method at this time is to turn an enemy into an ally."

The Divine General 'Heavenly Sword' Kogure Zenjirou was most feasible for such a thing.

"That guy should have already noticed the Chief moving about behind the scenes."

Kogure had seen Amami after Amami had been saved by Ashiya Doman on the night of the fireworks festival two years ago. Maybe Kogure had already noticed that the disappeared Mystical Investigator Chief had actually been imprisoned by the Onmyou Agency. Back then, Kogure had stayed in the agency due to his responsibility as an Independent Exorcist and the societal importance of the Onmyou Agency. But considering his personality, it was surprising that he had been able to tolerate all of this. Right now, it was very possible that he would rebel against the Onmyou Agency about this spiritual disaster plan. If they had gotten in back then, they could have made all of this plot public. Seeing as they had no idea where Harutora and Ohtomo were, making contact with Kogure was the first priority.

"Speaking of which, we can only figure out where Kogure lives with Kyouko's divination. Is Kogure-san living in his residence from his Exorcist Bureau times?"

"He should be..... But that guy doesn't go back much."

"How does he change? He should go back at some point, right? They why don't we....."

"Hold on, Touji. The Chief would know if Kogure went back. It would be safer if we contacted him outside."

Suzuka had already escaped the organization after learning about the spiritual disaster terrorism. Of course, Kurahashi and the others would have strengthened their guard. Maybe they had laid a trap somewhere.

"We can't be so insistent on safety right now."

"Even so, we can't take such a big risk. That's a foolish strategy."

"I don't think we can be cautious right now."

"We can be both cautious and fast at the same time."

Amami waved his fan. Touji smiled bitterly and noticed Natsume.

"What's up, Natsume?"

"Eh, sorry. Um..... Touji and Amami-san were just talking normally, but it turned pretty interesting."

"Hear that, Touji?"

Touji laughed.

"Amami-san, although contacting Kogure-san is the priority, can't we consider the other two, Miyoshi Tougo and Yamashiro Hayato?"

"As I said before, we might be able to convince Miyoshi, but Yamashiro is Kurahashi's underling. But I don't know the details. I suspect that it was the Chief's order for Yamashiro to enter such a straight-laced team."

"Is he a spy?"

"It's possible."

Natsume spoke to Amami.

"Can we approach any Divine Generals other than Kogure-san?"

"Well, we probably won't even be able to convince any others. Also, we're designated as criminals, so we won't be able to get close to them so easily."

"Then can we ask for the help of some practitioners outside the Onmyou Agency?"

"Well, those guys are scattered, and the Onmyou Agency keeps the outside powers in check."

It looked like Kogure was the only possibility.

"Anyways, I trust that guy. Contacting Kogure is the highest priority right now."

Natsume nodded deeply and seriously.

Natsume talked with Kyouko a bit, then walked out of the room alone.

Kyouko watched Natsume's back and asked Touji what was wrong with her. Natsume's expression was very grim. Touji smiled wryly at Kyouko.

"It's probably the thing from before. Didn't Akino want to contact Kogure-san on her own in place of Tenma?"

"I was surprised too. I thought it was pretty mature."

"Natsume said that what Amami-san and I were talking about was very interesting. That girl's a bit surprising from my point of view."

Touji spoke happily. To him, Akino's existence was a positive influence on Natsume.

"Speaking of Akino-chan, what's up with what Suzuka said?"

"Oh, the Full Moon? Sorry, but I'm not too knowledgeable about it either. In the end, it's a magical tool paired with the Raven's Wing."

Amami smiled wryly and waved his fan.

"Well, it wouldn't be strange for a moon rabbit to go along with the yatagarasu[2] .Naturally, none of that would be out of the ordinary."

The three-legged yatagarasu symbolized the sun in astronomy-related Onmyouji. The magical tool Yakou had left behind was the shikigami Raven's Wing, modeled after a yatagarasu. But just like how everything contained both yin and yang, this yatagarasu had a counterpart. That was the moon rabbit that symbolized the moon. These two symbolized the sun and moon in the 'Gathered Legends of the Yatagarasu and Moon Rabbit' written by Abe no Seimei.

Natsume and Suzuka had reacted to the phrase 'Full Moon'.

'Full Moon? I heard my stepfather say that before.'

'Isn't that one of Yakou's magical tools!? There wasn't anything about it other than the fact that it went with the Raven's Wing.'

Suzuka was a researcher of the Imperial Onmyoudou established by Yakou. Her knowledge of Yakou matched Natsume's. She knew more details about magic than Natsume. But even if she was a researcher, Suzuka knew only of the Full Moon's existence.

"There's a lot of information left about the Raven's Wing that was created with it, but nothing on the Full Moon....."

Since Harutora had already said the name Full Moon[3] as Yakou's reincarnation, many of their speculations were verified. The Raven's Wing was black clothing as a magical tool and appeared as a shikigami in the form of a yatagarasu. It was thus very likely that its counterpart, the Full Moon, was a shikigami as well as a moon rabbit.

"Hey, didn't Harutora not use the Raven's Wing's strength at the start? Does it have to stabilize in the same way?"

"But isn't Akino the first moon rabbit living spirit?"

Just then, Suzuka spoke up calmly.

"I wonder what the Souma experiments have found out."

"We can't research what Yakou did since it was so long ago. The Full Moon might have been passed down, or it might have been hidden after the war."

"But....."

"What, you wanted me to talk. My father did the same thing to me."

Amami coughed to lighten the atmosphere.

"Let's not make useless speculation about the Full Moon. Who knows what it truly is. It wouldn't be strange if what Suzuka says is correct."

As expected of him, Amami spoke reasonably and convincingly while easing their feelings about Akino.

"Right, Amami-san. What about asking my grandmother to help you?"

"Sorry Kyouko, but Miyo-chan's already cut off from the outside. The Chief probably ordered it."

---

[2] Two things here. First, East Asian folklore has a story about a rabbit living on the moon. Second, the yatagarasu is associated with the sun.
[3] He addresses Akino as such in Volume 12.

"Are we already out of options?"

"But Grandma's contacts aren't only inside the magic community. She has a big influence in politics, business, and the media. Though it's very important to stop the spiritual disaster terrorism, it's also important to stop my father's societal actions."

Chief Kurahashi's greatest weapon was his position as Onmyou Agency Chief and the power that accompanied it. It certainly could be effective if they could put pressure on that.

"Ah, that's true."

Amami put on a difficult expression.

"But it might take a long time to have Miyo-chan use her political power to impeach the Chief and stop the spiritual disaster terrorism. They might not make it so easy for us either."

"What about using political power directly?"

"That's not very possible. The Chief's been prominent in political circles for a long time, and he's already very well-trusted."

"What if we could?"

"Do you have some plan?"

"There's one person."

"Who?"

"Naota Kouzou."

"Oh, that's quite an important individual."

Of course, Touji wasn't saying this as a joke. Amami's eyes fluttered. Naota Kouzou was the current Secretary General of the Independent Party that had been at the forefront of the political world for many years.

Not long afterwards, Amami closed his eyes and said:

"Is he your father or something?"

"Biologically."

"Huh!? Your father!? Naota Kouzou?"

Kyouko cried.

"Didn't I say that already?"

"No, um, but....."

"Well, though he's my dad, I'm just a bastard child. Honestly, I'm just his mistress's kid."

"Huh!? That's so hard to imagine. How old is that man right now?"

"He just turned sixty."

"Ohh."

"But it's the first time you've said anything like that."

"Should I ask my mom for a way to contact him?"

"It's probably best not to. What would happen if an illegitimate child suddenly contacted him?"

"A scandal? I see."

"Do you know what to do?"

"What a pain."

Touji griped coldly.

"But unfortunately, I died a long time ago, so it doesn't matter for me[4]."

"Alright."

Amami spoke in a stern tone.

"I'll go too, then. Touji, get ready. But consider contacting Kogure as the priority, since he's more reliable."

Touji smiled.

"Understood."

Suisen, who was always behind the wheelchair, spoke quietly to Amami.

"Amami-sama, there's a phone call from Fujiwara-sama."

When Kyouko heard this, she said:

"Ah!? Fujiwara!? Is that...?"

"Oh, it's Fujiwara-sama."

"So you made contact with him, huh."

Fujiwara-sensei was a former practical skills teacher at the Onmyou Academy. He had taught Touji and the before. He had retired at the same time as Principal Kurahashi. Amami and Touji had succeeded in contacting him during their fugitive life.

"What? Hey! Touji, there's news."

As he spoke with Fujiwara, Amami suddenly gave Touji an order. Touji silently listened to the instructions.

Amami finished speaking soon afterwards.

"Eh, Natsume-chan, is the report over? Sorry for not being able to help." Tenma said from next to Hama.

"No, Touji and I are enough for the report."

---

[4] I believe Amami is referencing the fact that he's supposed to be officially dead.

"Is Touji-kun still up there?"

"Yeah, Kyouko is too. She's preparing for divination."

"Hmm? What's wrong?"

"No, Akino....."

Just then, a male voice said "Souma Akino went out of the warehouse when she noticed Tsuchimikado Natsume coming down."

Natsume immediately looked at the Hama next to her. Natsume didn't really understand cars and Hama only looked like a large Jeep to her, but it was a practical vehicle that gave her a sense of stability.

"She left when she saw me? Why?"

"Sorry, but I cannot speculate the reason why." Hama responded.

"It was definitely because she got scolded."

This time it was a female voice. Suzuka said this as she worked next to them.

"That was because with Akino's speed, she had to be backup in case we needed to escape....."

"In any case, she doesn't have enough experience."

Suzuka hadn't participated in their operation before, since as a Divine General, Miyoshi was familiar with her aura and could spot her very easily. Actually, they had been strongly opposed to Akino joining them before they left. Though they recognized that Akino had grown, she still lacked mental fortitude compared to the others.

"Natsume-chan, you're too soft on her. This isn't a game."

"....."

Natsume didn't say anything and silently looked at Suzuka. Suzuka was the daughter of Dairenji Shidou, so she was a member of the Souma clan. Akino was also someone from the same clan.

Tenma spoke to lighten the atmosphere.

"Suzuka-chan, don't get all grump again. We finally got to see Natsume-chan again."

"Hah!?"

"Akino-chan's younger than Suzuka-chan and she doesn't really know how to interact with her, so....."

"Hey, stupid Glasses, you wanna die? Go write your will!!!"

"Hold on, Dairenji Suzuka. I will take immediate action if you inflict harm to my master."

"Shut up, machine."

Suzuka shouted loudly, extremely mad. Hama started its engine and Tenma hastily stopped him. Though Natsume wasn't too well-versed in the field either, Suzuka definitely wasn't good with interpersonal relationships. She was a very petulant[5] person.

"Um....."

"What do you wanna say, Glasses?"

"Suzuka-chan, you've grown quite a bit over this year and a half. You're better at reading the atmosphere than before."

"You goddamn Glasses!!!"

"I understand the stuff about Akino. I'll ask her about it afterwards. Suzuka-san, how are things? How's your analysis of Hama?"

"Well, there's some progress. This thing is really complicated. What a pain. Glasses' father was a real weirdo."

"That's a bit embarrassing."

"Anyway, the most surprising thing is that this armored thing is made up of many shikigami. There's groups of shikigami making up the engine, tires, and barrier. I've never seen this kind of shikigami configuration before. It's similar to Yakou's Armored Juggernaut, but it has some revolutionary features."

It was certainly unheard of for manmade shikigami to control other manmade shikigami.

"Simply put, it's like a computer. Hama A is the control system and has a lot of corresponding applications installed on it. Most of the shikigami spells that are just simple manmade types, nothing very unique. But no one's thought of controlling hundreds of manmade shikigami to improve their capabilities. It might be on a level comparable to Imperial Onmyoudou and General Onmyoudou."

Come to think of it, Natsume and the others couldn't have escaped their crisis without Hama. It looked like Natsume would have to properly thank Hama and Tenma's father.

"Have you gotten any new information since yesterday?"

"Well, I'm not specialized in computers or cars. I can only ask the guy who made this. But the workshop data that this thing was produced with might be hidden."

"Yeah....."

"And keep in mind, if you guys fail to get in contact, we won't be able to chat idly like this."

"Yeah. I'll go up and report this information now."

Suddenly, Natsume's gaze wavered and she staggered, losing her balance.

"Natsume?"

"Natsume-chan?"

"S-Sorry."

---

[5] Childishly bad-tempered

Maybe standing for too long had a toll on her. Her aura became disorderly all of a sudden. It felt like when she failed at using magic. Just then, Kyouko came down from the upper floor.

"Natsume-chan, bad news. The Onmyou Agency issued an announcement about the spiritual disaster terrorism."

"Huh?"

"Hah?"

"An announcement!? What exactly is going on?"

"No, the Onmyou Agency relayed an announcement that there would be a spiritual disaster on March third. They said the Twin-Horned Syndicate gave them the information. And they said that the mastermind behind the Twin-Horned Syndicate went by the name North Star King Tsuchimikado Harutora!"

At that point everyone was stunned. Of course, Harutora definitely wouldn't have made such an announcement.

"The Onmyou Agency people want to pin the spiritual disaster terrorism on Harutora and put the spiritual disaster prevention personnel on guard. With this, it'll be very hard to contact Kogure-san. If we don't think of something....."

Chapter 2 - Omens of the Storm

Part 1

Low-hanging clouds covered the entire sky.

A short walk from the Onmyou Agency building was a liquor store. A helicopter was on its roof.

In the center of the roof was a girl who had come here without permission.

Soon after, a young man appeared from the helicopter. He wore an out-of-fashion monocle and slowly approached the girl. Then, another young man suddenly appeared behind the girl as if to welcome the first. They were Yashamaru and Kumomaru.

Takiko had used the Souma family's secret magic that night two days ago. Though it was extremely simple, the ripples caused by the spell had disturbed the spirit flow of the surrounding area and caused a spiritual disaster chain reaction - a Phase Four. Since that night, spiritual disasters had been happening one after another inside the city. It had also more or less affected the magic-using Takiko. Yashamaru had frequently complained to Takiko afterwards when she regained consciousness. But actually, there was no helping it. Even so, shikigami were just a practitioner's tools, so they lived for their practitioner regardless of what purpose they were used for. More importantly, Takiko was the shaman princess of the Souma family. She had been entrusted with the Souma clan's desire two years ago.

Takiko's aura had skyrocketed after her change. In addition, the strengths of her defensive shik

"To be honest, I'm really envious."

"Hmm?"

"What exactly was she looking at back then?"

"Hmm....."

"Was it the announcement?"

Yesterday, the Onmyou Agency had relayed an announcement from Tsuchimikado Harutora. He had announced the next spiritual disaster terrorist incident as the leader of the Twin-Horned Syndicate and taking the name of North Star King. Of course, Yashamaru and Kurahashi had fabricated all of this. And it had been very effective, with great commotions showing up all over Tokyo. Though the Hinamatsuri Repurification spiritual disaster two years ago had already been suppressed, the painful memories of the Great Hinamatsuri Purification four years ago still lingered in people's hearts.

"It might be presumptuous to say, but we might have gone too far with our maneuvering this time."

"Is there opposition?"

"Yes."

The Onmyou Agency had engineered the spiritual disaster terrorism and pinned their crime onto Harutora. It was strategically important.

Challenging the North Star King was something that Yashamaru had always wanted to do.

"I'm really looking forward to it."

"Also, just as a safeguard, it's time to curtail his actions."

"Ah, right."

"And just one thing, make sure to decorate the Princess's surroundings."

"Ah, that. Understood."

"Then, let's begin."

"...Yashamaru." Suddenly, Takiko called out.

"Harutora still hadn't showed up."

Takiko became silent again and stared at the city below.

Part 2

"That's right. The Exorcist Bureau has started to enter a guarded state against spiritual disasters."

Yuge silently nodded to her boss's words.

This was a meeting room of the Exorcist Bureau main branch.

Miyachi Iwao, the Intelligence Division Chief Kenichi Watanabe, Independent Exorcist Kagami Reiji, and Yuge Mari were present.

The Exorcist Bureau was very busy right now. Even though they were sitting in the meeting room, they could sense the shaky atmosphere inside the bureau. The spiritual disaster terrorism announcement had clearly been a shock. This spiritual disaster terrorism announcement had been in the name of the Twin-Horned Syndicate, but unlike before, it had been a single person - Tsuchimikado Harutora - rather than an organization.

The Onmyou Agency had been constantly hostile towards him since the summer of two years ago. A Phase Four had happened around Ogikubo a couple days ago. The people present at the time had confirmed traces of Tsuchimikado Harutora. Also, judging by the scale and expansion speed of the Phase Four spiritual disaster, it was hard to imagine that it had been a naturally-occurring spiritual disaster.

They finally understood that Tsuchimikado Harutora was Yakou's reincarnation.

Come to think of it, the 'Child Prodigy' Dairenji Suzuka had vanished from the Onmyou Agency a few days ago. Independent Officer Shigeoka had judged that she was with Tsuchimikado Natsume and the others.

The spiritual disaster early detection sensory net that the Onmyou Agency had laid out had already covered the entire city region. But the situation this time was very special.

"I'm very uneasy about the many spiritual disasters right now, but we're very short on time right now. Let's turn towards that direction."

"Okay, understood."

Tsuchimikado Harutora had been a fugitive for a long time. According to the Mystical Investigator's hard work, he was still in hiding.

But if he was truly planning a spiritual disaster, he couldn't stay in hiding forever. He would take some sort of action. In that case, they could find his whereabouts. Though he was Yakou's reincarnation, he couldn't completely eliminate his presence. Also, many Spirit Sensers were targeting Harutora and could curb his actions.

It had already been two years since then, but it had already been four years since the first spiritual disaster terrorist attack.

Yuge had been through both spiritual disasters. She had been an exorcist the first time and an Independent Exorcist the second time.

Yuge hadn't been able to show herself up during the Great Hinamatsuri Purification, the first spiritual disaster terrorist attack. Of course, it had been the same for the Exorcist Bureau, and Tokyo had suffered huge damage as a result. But the second time, during the Hinamatsuri Repurification, the Exorcist Bureau had minimized damage even without preventative measures. But now they faced a third time.

"Then, Yuge and Kagami will be assigned to headquarters and the Meguro Branch. I'll go to the main agency, and Shigeoka will go to Shinjuku."

This way, Kogure would be able to move freely, which was good for the Onmyou Agency. Yuge was just a shield, and Kogure was currently a sword. The Exorcist Bureau's former ace had already become the Onmyou Agency's trump card.

"Director, where is Officer Shigeoka today?"

In response to Yuge's question, Miyachi said:

"Ah, that guy's in Hachioji."

"Hachioji? The warehouse?"

There was an Onmyou Agency warehouse in Hachioji storing a military-use Armored Juggernaut that Yakou had left behind.

"He's going to pick up equipment for responding to the upcoming spiritual disaster."

"Eh? From Fujikawa? But the test models were supposed to be next year."

"Of course, it's not complete."

"Is he going to use the Armored Juggernaut?"

"It's uncertain. Of course, everything depends on how the situation develops, so who knows."

"Don't forget that this spiritual disaster announcement was made by Tsuchimikado Harutora by the name of the North Star King. That means that he accepts that he's Yakou's reincarnation."

"So this time we have to keep in mind that any number of things might happen."

Miyachi stroked his beard and smiled coolly.

"This....."

The Onmyou Agency Development Lab in Hachioji was in a magical object warehouse. Shigeoka was fascinated by the thing in front of his eyes. At first glance, it seemed like nothing more than a bus or truck. There were eight in total. These were all specialized, top-of-the-line test models to be released in the near future.

They still didn't have an official name.

Their development code was 'Model FAR Version 7'.

They were multilegged general-use mechanical shikigami made jointly by Fujikawa Industries and the Onmyou Agency Development Lab.

There were many people gathered here. Other than Shigeoka, there was also the Onmyou Agency Chief Kurahashi Genji and the Development Lab Chief Iehara Tadashi.

"This is truly spectacular. A shikigami worthy of defending Japan's capital."

"Twelve FAR were created in total, but right now only eight are complete."

"As for functional adjustments, it should be more effective to do them during actual use."

"Chief Kurahashi, it's as you say. Tokyo is being threatened for the third time now. Deploying the FAR is key to rescuing Tokyo."

This time, Shigeoka would use all eight FAR that could be used. Shigeoka had lost many shikigami in the battle pursuing Hama before.

"Chief, when will the adjustments start?"

"Right now. There's no time anyways, so do your best to use the FAR to their full capacity."

"Understood."

The Onmyou Agency Magic Crime Investigation Bureau seemed to have become a battleground.

There were clamorous voices interweaving, bells, people leaving, and data piling up into mountains.

The Mystical Investigators were busily hurrying about.

But it was all productive activity.

The spiritual disaster terrorism announcement was unprecedented. The Mystical Investigators were directly involved with stopping it beforehand if possible. Everyone in the Onmyou Agency had come over to the Mystical Investigators to investigating in conjunction with the metropolitan police. The Mystical Investigators were investigating Tsuchimikado Harutora to the utmost.

Of course, that was the same for the Mystical Investigator Yamashiro. This was an opportunity for him. He had already been on a team with Kogure and Miyoshi for three months, but they hadn't produced any results. Also, he had let Tsuchimikado Natsume escape during a prior incident. But if he were able to successfully capture Tsuchimikado Harutora this time, not only could he clear his name, he could also improve his reputation. Yamashiro was one of the most junior National First-Class Onmyouji, and he didn't have any real exploits to name. He couldn't pass up this opportunity, more so than the other Divine Generals.

"Miyoshi-san, has Kogure-san not contacted us?"

"No."

"But why? Where's Kogure-san and what's he doing right now?"

"It's the fourth time you've asked the same question. The answer's still the same - I don't know either."

Yamashiro, Kogure, and Miyoshi had formed a team. But the three of them usually didn't move together. Ignoring Miyoshi for now, Yamashiro and Kogure often acted independently.

"Could something have happened?"

"It's possible. But it's his business. Even if something happened, he can relay it to us immediately. Even if he were sneak-attacked by Tsuchimikado Harutora, for example."

Miyoshi replied calmly.

"I'm not sure what Kogure-san intends. I wonder what he's thinking exactly."

"There's not much time until Hinamatsuri."

"Kogure-san probably realizes that."

Miyoshi maintained his composed attitude.

"Right, Miyoshi-san, did you get any information from the captured Tsuchimikado family?"

"No detailed information."

Miyoshi flipped the pages of his book as he replied.

After a while, Miyoshi closed the book and spoke.

"Yamashiro-san, it's time to eat lunch."

Miyoshi pointed at the clock on the wall. The clock was pointing to noon exactly.

Part 3

Kogure had said that he would contact Harutora directly. It felt wrong to him that Harutora was planning a spiritual disaster and had announced this. After all, Harutora had exorcised a spiritual disaster before with Natsume and the others.

"But Kogure doesn't know the current Harutora."

Though Harutora was Harutora, he had still changed. If they could tell Kogure that Harutora's nature hadn't changed, they might be able to convince him.

"But we still don't have any evidence that Harutora hasn't changed."

The only thing they could bring up was probably Akino's testimony. She had told them that he was still the Harutora they were familiar with. But Akino and Harutora had only crossed paths for a brief while. It was still insufficient evidence.

"The only thing we can do now is talk with that fool Kogure and pull him over to our side. This is urgent."

Natsume and the others had immediately moved out according to those instructions.

But it was still hard to get in touch with Kogure. Though Kyouko's divination were very accurate, it was still difficult to accurately find one specific person. Also, Kyouko's fatigue had already reached her limits. Kyouko and the others had been forced to rest since then.

It was already nine in the morning when Amami called for everyone.

Time was mercilessly ticking by.

The first thing Natsume felt when she woke up was regret.

Her body was very light, her mind was sharp, and her thinking was clear. This was the result of getting adequate sleep, as well as a reminder of the time she had wasted. Natsume checked the time. It was already four in the afternoon. She jumped up in a panic.

"Ah, Natsume."

"Ah, you're awake?"

Akino and Tenma looked at Natsume. Suzuka showed her face through Hama's window and said:

"You're finally up. You must have had such a nice sleep."

"Sorry."

"We don't have time to dawdle here."

Natsume spoke anxiously and Tenma nodded.

"To be honest, this is an emergency. But if we don't properly rest, we won't be able to maintain our spiritual power when it's important."

"Especially Natsume-chan. Both Hokuto and your lightning magic exhaust a lot of magical energy."

"Yeah, Natsume-chan hasn't gotten much rest recently."

"How's Kyouko's recovery?"

"She herself says that she's fine, but that's probably not true."

"Nothing we can do about it. We're not superhuman. All we can do is believe in Kyouko."

Pleasantly surprised, Tenma spoke up.

"I didn't think you could say things like that, Suzuka-chan."

"Hah? You damn Glasses!!"

"It sounded very mature."

"Hmph, I'm not a kid anyway."

Suzuka had changed a lot, and for the better.

"Akino?"

Natsume noticed Akino and spoke.

Akino raised her head and replied hastily.

"Hmm?"

"What's wrong?"

Akino smiled and answered "Nothing", but she didn't look very energetic.

Just then Suzuka spoke from the window:

"Hey, you should say something."

Akino lowered her head, her face reddening.

"Akino's already working very hard."

Natsume defended her.

Tenma smiled and said:

"Don't worry, Akino, Suzuka was always very strong-headed."

"Why are you using that tone again!? Enough of that, stupid Glasses!"

"Huh~ You're not a kid, right~"

"Wanting to kill you has nothing to do with age!"

"Dairenji Suzuka, if you inflict harm to my master....."

"You stupid machine, you're so annoying every single time!!!"

Suzuka's face reddened and she turned in a different direction. Everyone laughed. Akino laughed too, her rabbit ears swaying.

Just then, a voice sounded out.

"Hoho, how troublesome."

At that moment, everyone was shocked.

"You have a spiritual presence I have never sensed before. I cannot guarantee your safety." Hama's engine started on its own.

Touji was already wrapped in demonic aura as he jumped down from the second floor.

A black-clothed boy appeared in a corner of the warehouse.

"Hahaha, everyone looks to have improved."

It was Ashiya Doman.

The Onmyouji 'D' who had once attacked the Onmyou Academy had a different body from before, but his aura hadn't changed.

"Priest, please take your pranks somewhere else. There's no time."

Just then, a white-haired man wearing glasses and a coat appeared in the middle of the warehouse.

"Ohtomo-sensei!"

"I'm glad to see you, Natsume-kun, I really am."

Ohtomo smiled warmly from the bottom of his heart.

Chapter 3 - Dissonance

Part 1

Her friends cheered one by one. Tenma and Suzuka continued cheering as Touji reapplied his seal. Akino gingerly peeked over, still hiding behind a stack of cardboard boxes. Kyouko, who had stopped her divination and looked over through the window upon hearing the noise, tearfully shouted "Ohtomo-sensei!".

It was like a dream come true.....!

Natsume stared straight at Ohtomo. It was honestly like a dream for him to appear of his own initiative when they had basically given up hope of contacting him.

"Hama! At ease. This is our friend."

"Understood."

Hama cut off its power as Tenma instructed. Ohtomo looked at Tenma and Hama thoughtfully.

"Let me make sure I understand this. That rough-looking car over there is Tenma-kun's shikigami? It's quite complex - no, it's even composed of a spell I haven't really seen before."

"Yeah, this is the mechanical shikigami my dad made."

"Your dad? That's quite....."

Kyouko also leaned out of the window from where she had been working.

"Ohtomo-sensei, it's great that you're alright....."

"You too. You've gone through a lot, Kyouko-kun."

"Speaking of which, why didn't you contact us!? Do you understand the situation right now? Are you an idiot!?"

"Hold on, Suzuka. First off, how did you find this place, Sensei?"

"Ah, that. You guys fought the 'Colonel' in this huge car, and the Mystical Investigators hadn't gotten any reports that you abandoned it, so there could only be a few places in this city where you could be hiding out. And with Chief Amami the way he is, I thought it might be in this region."

He got along great with them, as could be expected. Not only did he increase their side's fighting strength, but more importantly, he was a 'friend'. Also, he was Ohtomo-sensei, a former Divine General who had risked himself to save Natsume.

Patter. Kyouko opened the door and hurried down. Amami followed with Suisen pushing his wheelchair.

"Chief." Ohtomo bowed. "I hope you're doing well."

".....I am." A quiet smile. "Let's enter the main topic. You definitely understand our situation to some degree. You've heard the terrorist attack announcement, of course?"

"That's why I hurried here to help."

"Yeah. Can you get in touch with Kogure?"

"You want to get him to defect? I feel like that depends on how Harutora-kun presents himself....."

"Not necessarily. Actually, it's possible for me to go convince him directly. After all, that guy saw me two years ago in that park....."

The conversation between the two of them continued pleasantly without any sentiment about their long-awaited reunion. The topic jumped around rapidly. In this kind of situation, both sides needed to understand the meaning of the other party's words several steps ahead. The atmosphere in the warehouse became tense as everyone watched their conversation.

"But Chief, we have no chance of winning in a straight-up fight against Zenjirou, you know? After all, Independent Officer Miyachi's on the other side."

"Hmph. That chance only applies to a fight of magic. Get Kogure over to our side is much easier."

"A war of information, then?"

"His reputation hasn't fallen at all. If he says a loud 'No', quite a few Onmyouji in the agency might stop."

"You're going to stop the terrorist attack with that?'

"It's the most suitable method right now."

".....I see. I understand. We'll have a huge advantage later if we can rope in Zenjirou. Good luck with that, Chief."

Amami raised an eyebrow. "Later? And what does 'good luck with that' mean?"

"It's because I have other things I need to do."

He said that sentence matter-of-factly, but Natsume didn't miss the implications in it.

"Eh? S-Sensei, you're not going to fight with us?" Tenma asked in a panic.

Ohtomo didn't speak. Another restless atmosphere rose up in the warehouse where they were gathered.

".....I knew something was up for you to suddenly come over here. Say it, what's your real goal for coming back?" Amami pointed out. Ohtomo smiled bitterly and said:

"Chief, I originally wanted to speak with you alone..... I'll put it straight. I came to tell you all to just quietly stand back without forcing yourselves. I'll go deal with the Agency Chief and the Souma. Chief, you guys just need to keep hiding like this."

"Wha--"

What? The word left her mouth reflexively, but she was stunned again. Touji was the only one mostly unshaken, since he seemed to have anticipated this to some level.

"Just you - no wait, are you saying that you're going to confront the Chief, the Souma, Miyachi, and the entire Onmyou Agency alone?"

"Yes." A brief reply.

"Do you think you can win?"

"There was never a need to 'win'."

"Then stopping the terrorist attack is enough?"

"They were never plotting any terrorist attack in the first place."

"What?"

Ohtomo turned to Suzuka. "Suzuka-kun, can you come with me when I return to the Onmyou Agency?"

Everyone present turned to look at Suzuka.

"......A large-scale magic ritual....." Suzuka chose every word carefully. "......Perhaps it's magic with 'god summoning' at its core. The previous two spiritual disaster terrorist attacks might be parts of the ritual. As for the 'god' part of the magic..... it refers to the Souma clan's legendary ancestor and the ara-mitama guardian of Edo, Taira no Masakado....."

"That's their goal right there. Dairenji Shidou plans to push the Phase Four into the next phase, Phase Five - the 'Final Phase'. The previous two spiritual disaster terrorist attacks, as well as this third one, were all experiments for that theory....."

Judging by the 'next time is for real' that Yashamaru had once said to Suzuka, the terrorist attack this time would most likely be different from the past two. In other words, it would be much harder to warn people beforehand this time.

As a result, they could only defeat the enemies on the other side..... If they didn't know the spell's composition, they couldn't obstruct it, so they could only defeat the caster directly...

"I know the magic they're preparing."

Ohtomo replied calmly.

"It's the 'Tensou Chifu Ritual'."

"T-Tensou Chifu Ritual!? B-But that--"

"The same one you're thinking of. The Tsuchimikado ritual of worship. And the secret among secrets, even higher up than the Taizan Fukun Ritual."

The Tsuchimikados' greatest secret ritual, the 'Tensou Chifu Ritual'. But it had been something from before Yakou's era.

But if what the boy ara-mitama calling himself Ashiya Doman had said, he had been watching the world's changes since the Heian era. Naturally, he would have experienced the chaos during the Pacific War era 'first-hand'.

The great spiritual disaster that had attacked the city during the war period was but a page of history to Natsume and the others. History constantly went on, and Natsume had no way of actually experiencing it with her less than twenty years of age.

But if it were related to Harutora's past, she couldn't ignore it. Natsume asked:

"W-Wait! But..... why? Why were the Souma trying to perform the 'Tensou Chifu Ritual' or whatever if they were following Yakou? Also, didn't the Tsuchimikado family only perform the Tensou Chifu Ritual for the emperor--"

When she was halfway done speaking, Natsume's face paled as she realized something.

"That's right, the Tensou Chifu Ritual was originally a purifying and life-extending ceremony held for the emperor. The Souma clan only performed it for their king - the 'New Emperor' Taira no Masakado. The Souma may be aiming to summon the ara-mitama Taira no Masakado. Also the fact that they're using the Tensou Chifu Ritual means that they're trying to lengthen its existence rather than going after a temporary 'channeling'. That might be Yakou's legacy."

"....."

Natsume stood there blankly, as if she couldn't hear anything.

...Reviving Taira no Masakado?

Was something like that possible? No, hadn't Yakou failed because it was impossible? Even so, were Chief Kurahashi, Takiko, and the others still trying for such a great challenge?

Summoning a god into the world. It was some kind of madman's ravings.

Ohtomo's confidence that he could go alone had come from Doman's information. He didn't need to fight head-on. If he only needed to impair the ceremony, maybe Ohtomo could do it alone. By further exposing the unjust actions of Kurahashi and the others, he might be able to defeat them.

"...Please wait, Sensei." Touji, who had been silent until now, opened his mouth. "If you're going to go obstruct them with all your might, then that's fine. But even if you decide that, it's always better to have some more help. What you said just now makes it seem like we don't have a common enemy."

".....You could also say that."

"Why?"

"Idiot, do I need to say that? Of course that's because it's dangerous."

"Then we really can't just sit back and wait."

".....The Phase Four from last time."

"Hmm?"

"That was something that Souma Takiko did. She did something almost like 'god summoning', and that's how things ended up."

"Huh.....!?"

"Sorry, you can't do this unless you're an elite Onmyouji. My students have no chance."

"But....."

They hadn't imagined being rejected like this. The current Ohtomo was different from the Ohtomo-sensei from before.

He didn't have that easygoingness. The past Ohtomo-sensei had been free-spirited even in a crisis. His principles were firm, but everything else was flexible and unrestrained.

He had changed over this year and a half.

"......What kind of joke is that?"

Touji opened his mouth to retort again. "We have to hide because it's a Phase Four? Or is it because there's someone who can cause spiritual disasters at will? Please. I'll fight whatever comes, whether it's an oni or a Nue. It's Taira no Masakado, right? Of course there's going to be head-to-head fighting, right?"

Touji balled a fist with no intention of backing down.

Ohtomo raised an eyebrow. Before he had the chance to say anything,

"Interesting."

His shikigami Doman interjected. "Not bad, youngster, you're definitely a living spirit. Judging by your spirit, it seems that you have some strength too. Let me test you. Gozu, Mezu!"

In the next moment, the two auras that poured out from his waist seeped into the warehouse and formed a man and a woman.

Phase Three mobile spiritual disasters, 'Type-Ogres'.

...W-What were these demonic auras? They were definitely the oni that had fought with Ohtomo-sensei on the academy building roof!

Doman had revealed Gozu and Mezu to Ohtomo before, but at the time Doman had only called them 'shadows'.

In other words - these were the real bodies! These were Ashiya Doman's shikigami!?

"Fight with that youngster. Who's first?'

"Me, me! I'm first, I'm first~~"

"Hey, Priest!" Amami and Ohtomo shouted at the same time.

But Touji grinned and slowly took off his bandanna. "Perfect. I have something I want to try out too."

"Not a bad demeanor. Okay, start."

Touji released his seal in the blink of an eye.

"Third seal, release!"

The demon bound inside Touji's body instantly awoke and demonic aura poured forth to cover his body, turning him into the form of a samurai. A pair of sharp horns and two fangs also appeared with his shout.

It was Natsume's second time seeing him like that. She still felt shocked. The two oni, Ohtomo-sensei, and Doman were even more engrossed.

"Wait, what's that!? What is that!?"

"As I said, that's a living spirit!"

In the next moment, the samurai charged straight at Gozu. The shockwave from his head-on-charge blew boxes away, and the walls and ceiling shook.

Haaaaahhhh---!"

Smashed onto the floor, Gozu let out an angered shout. "You goddamn brat! Die!" Flying into a rage, Gozu attacked Touji like a storm. Though his strength was surprising, his movements were overly monotonous, so Touji skillfully dodged his strikes and counterattacked.

"What's wrong!? Is that all you've got?"

"Graaaaahhhhh!"

Gozu bellowed and his demonic aura swelled up even further into a ball larger than his body. Touji looked on fearlessly, the demonic power burning like a fire throughout his body.

Not good. It wouldn't be good if this went on. Natsume thought this instinctively.

"Ashiya Doman!"

Ohtomo shouted loudly.

"Alright." Doman smiled. "Well, no helping it, stop right there."

Though Gozu looked completely as if he was about to charge forward, he stopped one second later. Raging killing intent showed in the look he gave Touji, but to a shikigami, the master's order was 'absolute'.

After confirming that the opponent had restrained himself, Touji also let go of his strength. "Reboot."

"......As I thought.' Touji panted for breath, looking at his hands and smiling in satisfaction. "I thought it was an illusion..... Looks like I really did become stronger, so strong that even I can't believe it."

"...No good."

Ohtomo's opinion still hadn't changed.

"It's certainly a rare, extremely powerful strength, but..... You still can't use it for this."

Touji angrily said ".....What do you mean? If you want to say something, just say it!"

"I mean what I said. It's still more convenient for me to act alone. Sorry, I still want to do things my own way. Doman."

Doman started chanting an incantation. Ohtomo performed complicated steps alongside the black wind that the incantation whipped up. Far Step. A method of moving through the spirit flow. "Wait", Kyouko shouted. "I met her, Wakamiya Eri's little sister!"

Ohtomo's expression changed, but in the next moment he melted into the black wind.

The tornado vanished.

Ohtomo, Doman, and the two oni disappeared.

Part 2

The roof of an old building in Ikebukuro. This place like a dead space of the city center was Harutora's current hideout. The floor was littered with stuff and the room was only filled with dim candlelight. In a corner of the room, Harutora sat cross-legged in front of a simple bed marked with magic sigils. A young girl with triangular fox ears was on the bed.

Harutora's defensive shikigami, Hishamaru, had returned back to her Kon form on the evening two days before Yasuzumi and the others had been captured. She had been hit by Miyachi's Yamantaka method, run into Takiko's 'god summoning', and broken out of Phase Four since then. Her originally unstable aura had lost its stability completely in that series of battles.

Even now, with Harutora constantly regulating her, Hishamaru was already in a dangerous state where she might disappear at any time if left alone.

"How's the situation outside?" He asked Saotome, who was next to him.

"It hasn't gotten as chaotic as anticipated."

"Really. Meaning the people trust the Onmyou Agency and the Exorcist Bureau."

".....How's the recovery going?"

"She can move normally tonight. She can use some stealth and magic, but....."

"She can't fight?"

".....I don't know."

In the end, he hadn't found any ways to resolve it and could only take responsive measures. "Anyways, this way we can have Kon go and get in contact with the 'Full Moon' first--"

"Harutora." Kakugyouki and the Raven's Wing had returned.

"What happened?"

"It's not here. It seems like there's activity over at the Full Moon."

Harutora reached his left arm out to take the Raven's Wing, staring into the depths of the Raven's Wing's golden eyes with his own.

".....Are there any problems?'

"It looks like..... Some emergency situation has happened where the Full Moon is."

If the Full Moon were in a crisis, then Natsume, who was with her, would also be in danger. At such a time, he would only be able to rely on the link between the Raven's Wing and the Full moon and head there with Far Step to help.

"What's important is recovering the Full Moon, right? I could go too..... or should she go?"

"No. Senpai's stealth is great, but it would be hard to bring her out even if you got close."

"Then what do we do? Is waiting all we can do?"

"Yeah. That's why we shouldn't move for no reason. Just hold the ritual here."

"Is that possible?" Kakugyouki and Saotome glanced at each other.

"It's technically a big violation of the rules, but in theory it can be done even if the Full Moon isn't nearby."

Harutora asserted. Saotome murmured something about being unable to accept it.

".....Harutora." Kakugyouki asked.

"It's almost time. Should I speak with Tsuchimikado Natsume? About her body's 'problem'."

"No..... You can't..... If Natsume knew that, it might have a negative effect on her. I can't take that risk."

"So--"

".....And I'm afraid of it." His lowered head gave away his true thoughts.

He might lose Natsume due to his own mistakes.

He couldn't help an overwhelming terror from pouring forth when he thought of that.

Harutora closed his eye and breathed deeply.

"Come help. It's the final task of the Taizan Fukun Ritual."

Fortunately, the warehouse where Natsume and the others were hiding hadn't been destroyed during Touji's fight.

"Come to think of it, there isn't any better place where we can hide Hama..... Kyouko-chan, sorry for making you try to perform divination on Kogure again so soon."

"It's alright."

The air in the warehouse was even heavier than normal.

Obviously, that was the fault of Ohtomo, who they had managed to reunite with.....

Ohtomo recognized the Souma's strength. In other words, Ohtomo judged that they didn't have the strength to contend with them. It was a big shock for all of them.

And what's more, the traces left from Touji's battle during Ohtomo's visit had forced them all to move.

".....Hmph, I knew he would just be trouble....."

Suzuka said with an irritated look. Natsume, Tenma, Kyouko, and Touji who had come close to winning against Gozu, were all wearing downcast expressions right now.

Just like Ohtomo had said, right now was a time when they needed to use all their strength. Ohtomo trusted his own judgments more than anything else and based his actions on them.

The 'my students' phrase that Ohtomo had said to Natsume and the others made them feel happy. But,

".....What is he joking about. We're not students anymore. And we left by our own wills, too. Isn't that the same for Ohtomo-sensei? Why do we have to keep letting Sensei shelter us?" Touji spat angrily. Half was because his opinion differed, and the other half was because he hadn't been viewed as an equal at all. Though his power certainly couldn't compete with Ohtomo's, it was hard for his heart to accept being scorned for this.

"Honestly. Ohtomo's still a newbie of a teacher. That stupid hot-blooded newbie teacher only teases his students because they’re too cute. You should be magnanimous and forgive him." Amami said with a smile.

"Anyways, that stupid white-hair's acting like an adult in front of you guys? Ridiculous. Don't believe what he looks like, he's actually just a boy at heart."

"Hahaha....."

Tenma and Suzuka laughed at him. Touji's mood improved quite a bit upon seeing that scene.

...The situation hadn't improved.

But those brief words improved their mental states. As expected, Amami was amazing.

"Ah, Chief Amami. What was with Ohtomo saying that Harutora 'got mad at him'?"

"To be honest, I don't know either. Maybe there are other reasons."

".....That means that Harutora's on his own?"

"That's already certain. The problem is how Harutora ended up on his own..... Anyways, Ohtomo judges that he 'can't team up' with him right now."

Natsume inadvertently sank into dejection as she listened to their conversation from the side.

Noticing the atmosphere, Amami waved his fan. "Well, nothing will happen right now by thinking about Harutora. We can't ignore that attack announcement. Anyway, you'll be able to meet him soon, right?"

...Right. Soon, probably.....

"......Speaking of which," Touji opened his mouth. "Chief Amami, did Kyouko say anything strange as Ohtomo-sensei was disappearing? Something about running into someone's little sister....."

At Touji's question, Natsume, Suzuka, and Tenma all recalled it.

"Ah....." Amami's expression was difficult. "Wakamiya Eri was Ohtomo's former teacher. But she died many years ago, and it was recorded as a suicide..... and that she was a fervent Yakou fanatic. Anyways, there are a lot of unclear things about it."

Suicide. Yakou fanatic. The combination of those two phrases gave Natsume a bad premonition.

The 'little sister' Kyouko had run into called herself Wakamiya Rika. She was a reporter for the Monthly Onmyouji, a famous magazine in the magic community.

"C-Come to think of it, what about asking that person to expose what the Onmyou Agency's doing to the media?"

Amami immediately rejected the idea that Tenma suddenly thought of.

"Kyouko said about the same thing. This isn't easy to accept, but we wouldn't be working this hard if a single reporter could successfully expose the Onmyou Agency."

"What if..... What if you spoke with the media directly? Maybe if it were you, who worked in the Onmyou Agency for many years and who suddenly vanished..."

"But it's 'Monthly', we won't be able to make it--"

"No no, the web edition is updated every day, you know?" Suzuka retorted.

"......Eh?"

"Also, I'm the Onmyou Agency's poster idol, so I can bring up something. The combination of the 'Child Prodigy' and the former division chief might be convincing."

"Well, that..... you see, the internet's kind of unreliable..... And even if we announce it on the net....."

"Daizen-sama!"

The door to the workroom opened and Suisen came out supporting Kyouko.

"I read Kogure's star!"

"Really!?" Natsume instantly brightened. "What about the other two?"

"Sorry, I still can't understand much..... But Kogure's star was eclipsed..... It might be some bad omen! We have to warn him quickly!"

"Well done. Thanks, Kyouko."

"Chief Amami, let's depart."

"Okay. Kyouko, tell everyone the specific time and place. Natsume and Touji, hurry to the area right away and forcefully come in contact with Miyoshi and Yamashiro. Suzuka, continue watching the area. Tenma, you're on standby this time. After all, you're the only one who can use Hama, and the living spirits have high mobility.

Then,

"W-What about me? I'm a living spirit too, and I'm confident in my legs.....?" Akino asked. Her tone seemed more like she was pleading than asking.

"Akino, you're still on standby. I understand your feelings, but right now we need the right people for the job."

"......Okay....."

She didn't fight back, but the pair of rabbit ears hanging down clearly showed Akino's dejection.

Natsume approached Akino and put her hands on her shoulders to console her, and then--

...Eh?

A distortion appeared on Akino's face in Natsume's vision. She instantly lost her sense of balance and she momentarily forgot where and when she was.

It was only for a moment. Since she was holding on to Akino, no one noticed Natsume's abnormality other than Akino, who was right in front of her.

"N-Natsume?"

"......It's nothing, suddenly standing up made me dizzy."

Come to think of it, she had experienced a similar sensation yesterday. Just like that time, traces of disruption were left in her circulating aura.

...Why?

She had gotten good sleep, so why - before she had time to think about it, Touji's "Natsume" pulled her thoughts back.

Kyouko explained the results of her divination in detail after she came down the stairs.

"Uh oh. Then, Akino, wait here for our good news."

After Natsume said that, she returned to Touji and the others. This time it was Tenma approaching her saying "Akino-chan, can you help me with something?". Though Akino agreed, her gaze still stayed on Natsume's figure as she walked into their strategy room.

Three minutes later, Natsume and Touji left the warehouse.

Chapter 4 - Journey

Part 1

Wakamiya Rika's sleeping time dwindled to almost nothing after the report of Tsuchimikado Harutora's spiritual disaster terrorism spread.

Wakamiya was a young journalist of a large publisher and belonged to the editing team of the Monthly Onmyouji. Just like its name, the magazine was a gathering of information related to Onmyouji. The Monthly Onmyouji was a magazine that introduced the world of magic and Onmyouji to the general public. But they had spent a lot of effort to get new readers. The representative example of this was their crowning the hero National First-Class Onmyouji with the title of 'Twelve Divine Generals'. That being said, they were just a magazine catering to the market. The editing team was a total of six people, including contract and part-time workers. Four of them were formal employees, including Wakamiya, of course.

"Hey! Kurahashi still isn't done with the Mystical Investigators' activity report yet?"

"Sorry, I'll go check."

"Furubayashi-san, I think he went to Hachioji regarding the matter of the 'Colonel' missing yesterday."

"Hachioji? The Development Lab, huh."

"In his investigation he noticed that the Fujikawa Industries people also went to Hachioji. Maybe they're developing a new type for military use."

"For the spiritual disaster terrorism, huh."

The Monthly Onmyouji's editing team had entered twenty-four-hour coverage mode since hearing the Onmyou Agency's announcement last afternoon. But the magic community was still exclusive, and it was very hard for outsiders to get important information.

Wakamiya registered herself in the name log and walked outside.

"Hey! Wakamiya!"

It was the editor-in-chief Furubayashi.

"What happened afterwards with the Kurahashi daughter's disappearance?"

"I still don't know. She hasn't appeared at the Onmyou Academy since then."

"What? You didn't say anything about such an important thing? Do you have any testimony from nearby residents? Kurahashi Kyouko's been taking leave from the Onmyou Academy since then, huh. And her father put a monitoring shikigami on her."

"Chief, it's best to be careful what you say. You can't ask the Kurahashi family directly."

"Of course. They're the world-famous Kurahashi family. That's why the Onmyou Agency Chief has to move in secret."

"Okay, I'll go sort it out now."

"Now? What were you doing yesterday and the day before!?"

"Uh, I had some business....."

Furubayashi got mad.

"It's the Onmyou Academy and the Tsuchimikado! Did you even know that Tsuchimikado Natsume's on the run!!!??"

"That..... Since a long time ago....."

"Hmph, don't be snippy with me!"

"The Mystical Investigators are searching for her whereabouts with all they have right now, so I don't think there's much for me to do."

"I want to hear a report, not excuses!"

"But I'm very busy right now. I'll make an official report to you later."

"You'd better realize the dangerous position you're in."

Just then,

"Furubayashi-kun, what's going on!?"

"President?"

"It's a big uproar. There was another announcement. If you don't have enough people, you come talk with me. This is the priority right now."

"Alright, thanks." He looked at Wakamiya. "Well then, contact me over the phone if there's news, Wakamiya."

The editing team understood several things about the evening the Phase Four spiritual disaster occurred in Ogikubo. They had learned that the captured Tsuchimikado family had been fugitives with Natsume. There had been a large-scale magic battle before the spiritual disaster happened. During the magic battle, 'Fire Demon' Miyachi who was known as the strongest exorcist had used a long-range magic, and his target had been Tsuchimikado Harutora who now called himself the North Star King. Also, the editor-in-chief had pointed out a small commotion in the Kurahashi residence along with the disappearance of the Chief's only daughter, Kurahashi Kyouko. Though they weren't sure how the Phase Four was related to the magic battle, they couldn't assume they were unrelated.

There were other things too. Before and after the spiritual disaster happened, there had been a large vehicle running amok in a place not far from Ogikubo. There were traces left behind by Independent Officer Shigeoka's shikigami team. Also, on the same day, there were witnesses who saw two people riding shikigami and flying in the direction of Ogikubo. Perhaps everything was somehow related. But Wakamiya and the others had too much work to do and could only limit themselves to possibilities. This incident was extremely special to Wakamiya, and she wanted to at least confirm who it was manipulating things in the shadows. This incident wasn't just a chain of events that caused the Phase Four in Ogikubo. The roots of this incident were related to the Hinamatsuri Repurification two years ago and the Great Hinamatsuri Purification four years ago.

"Maybe it truly started with Tsuchimikado Yakou."

Over the past two spiritual disasters, Wakamiya had locked on to one person, Hirata Atsune.

During the first spiritual disaster terrorist attack, the Great Hinamatsuri Purification, he had been given the missions of searching for the Twin-Horned Syndicate's hideout and investigating their secrets. Afterwards, he had been a central figure commanding the work related to the Twin-Horned Syndicate. But Hirata had suddenly vanished unaccounted for during the Mystical Investigator's joint Twin-Horned Syndicate sweep operation. The simultaneous disappearance of the 'Divine Fan' Amami had also shocked the entire magic community. After all, Amami was a veteran of the Onmyou Agency and the second-in-command. But Wakamiya had looked towards Hirata's disappearance. Unlike Amami, Hirata had vanished as the operation ended, apparently during the magic battle with the Twin-Horned Syndicate in the Exorcist Bureau Shinjuku Branch. Hirata's daily life had become a mystery after the Great Hinamatsuri Purification where he made his name. But the one thing she noticed was that at the same time, a girl stopped showing up around him. She was a red-haired girl wearing the Onmyou Academy uniform. The people around Hirata were generally all work-related except for that girl. But why was that? What's more, no one knew the girl's true identity even though people in the agency had seen her several times. Because of the uniform clue, Wakamiya had investigated the Onmyou Academy, but she wasn't an Onmyou Academy student. That was a discovery she couldn't ignore. This girl had visited the Onmyou Academy two summers ago and had been in Harutora's and Natsume's class. It was very possible that the girl's goal of visiting the school was to see the two Tsuchimikados. Also, it was very likely that this visit had been arranged by Onmyou Agency higher-ups. The relationship between Hirata and the red-haired girl was unclear, and she couldn't be sure of the girl's relationship with the two Tsuchimikados.

But Wakamiya had changed her investigation target to the people around her, and hence she had found out that she lived in a hotel very close to the agency building. But the work that followed would be extremely hard. Just like she had imagined, the girl was like an Onmyouji in that Wakamiya would lose her as soon as her attention lapsed. Perhaps she used stealth magic in her daily life. Even with that data, she was unable to make a judgment. But she had obtained information she had never dreamed of about that night three days ago. Actually, a helicopter from the Onmyou Agency had descended before the Phase Four in Ogikubo happened. An employee had seen the red-haired girl riding this helicopter. If the evidence was correct, then she had been at the scene of the Phase Four as well. And it had been the Onmyou Agency Chief Kurahashi who had arranged for the helicopter. Wakamiya was sure that there had been some sort of activity around it.

Part 2

When Wakamiya arrived at the hotel, it was already evening.

The girl lived in a luxury suite. Wakamiya was extremely interested and had reserved a room in the same place.

"First, the monitoring webcam." She could see the door to the girl's room with a wireless webcam.

"I should investigate first. If anything's too hard, I can think of other ways."

"This won't work, and this corner's a bit....."

Wakamiya walked along the hallway and looked at the door when she passed by the girl's room. She was surprised. Was the door open? Indeed, the door was slightly ajar. Wakamiya became extremely excited. This was an opportunity. If she went in right now.....

"What should I do? What should I do?"

Wakamiya entered the room, unable to resist the temptation. She tiptoed careful and looked around inside the room.

"No one's here?"

She told herself not to be careless, but there certainly was no one here and no traces of anyone having lived here. The red-haired girl had lived here for a while, so there should be some personal items, but she didn't notice anything. It was like an empty room.

"What's going on?"

Had she gone to the wrong room? Her information shouldn't have been wrong.

"Why aren't there any traces?"

Wakamiya boldly headed towards the bedroom, but she didn't spot anything at all. She became confused.

"Calm down. Could it just be a guise? The Ogikubo incident, the spiritual disaster announcement..... No....."

Wakamiya hastily walked outside.

"The princess changed locations a long time ago."

A young man had appeared. He looked at Wakamiya indifferently. But Wakamiya's face paled, her body stiffened, and she became unable to say anything at all. But she clearly understood that the 'Princess' the young man spoke of was that red-haired girl. But why was this young man still here? Wakamiya decided to probe deeper.

"I'm Wakamiya Rika of the Monthly Onmyouji editing team."

Wakamiya felt a chill in her body as if she had been sentenced to death.

"It wouldn't be good to have you die here. Magazine reporters have their routines. I'll have you tell me a few things first."

The young man approached Wakamiya. Wakamiya wanted to run, but her body wouldn't move. And it wasn't that she was too scared to move, she truly was unable to move. It looked like first-class magic had been cast on her.

"First, is anyone else working with you? Were you trying to approach the princess independently? Or do other people know?"

Wakamiya spoke without being able to control herself.

"S-Someone's working with me."

Wakamiya's eyes moved weakly as she was bound by magic, but her voice was smooth.

"Kogure-san....."

Kogure, standing by the doorway to the bedroom, stared at the young man with an ice-cold look, then drew the katana from his waist.....

Part 3

Wakamiya and Kogure had come in contact during the summer two years ago.

Who knew how many times she had interviewed him for the Monthly Onmyouji.

She was the little sister of his teacher from his academy days, Wakamiya Eri. She had interviewed Kogure for other reasons than magazine material.

"My big sister's death still pains me, but I want to ask about - no, I should ask about other things right now."

Wakamiya wanted to ask about what had happened in the fireworks festival last month.

This was what she wanted to spread the word about. It resonated with Kogure's determination. That night Kogure had seen Natsume die, confronted his close friend, and encountered Amami, yet had still chosen to stay in at the Onmyou Agency. He had three reasons.

First: Just like Kogure himself said on that night, even if there were a huge conspiracy being plotted within the agency, he couldn't run away from his identity as an Independent Exorcist in spiritual-disaster-ridden Tokyo. That was the main reason he had stayed in the Onmyou Agency.

Second: He wanted to confirm for himself. He wasn't trying to be wily or tricky. But if he swung his sword, he wanted to swing it of his own will.

Third: His feeling back then in that place. Ohtomo had hidden himself and Saotome had joined Harutora's side, so he ought to stay at the Onmyou Agency.

Though there was a huge darkness inside the Onmyou Agency, that wasn't true about all of the Onmyou Agency. Kogure had continued his work purifying spiritual disasters as he stayed at the Onmyou Agency. He had heard rumors that Shigeoka would be returning. Kogure felt that Shigeoka's spiritual disaster purification ability was better than his own, so it would be fine even if he left the Exorcist Bureau. He had transferred to the Mystical Investigators and used his own eyes, ears and spirit-sense to confirm what was happening in the Onmyou Agency. When he had determined this, Wakamiya had shown up.

It had already been a year and a half since then.

"This is already the second time."

Kogure said that as he entered the bedroom. His body was poised and ready as he held his blade in his left hand.

"Kogure-san, the..... the Unmoving Golden Chains....."

This incident had been Wakamiya's independent action. But they had asked about this hotel before. And Kogure had given Wakamiya his recommendations during the matter regarding Hirata Atsune. But in the end, the young man before him - no, the shikigami - was outside of Kogure's expectations.

He had died once before.

"Don't try running away this time, Mutobe Chihiro of the Twin-Horned Syndicate."

The 'Divine Sword' - Kogure Zenjirou.

Part 4

It was already evening when Natsume and Touji reached the station.

The two of them had come to the JR Ochanomizu Station, avoiding the agency building as much as possible as they passed by it.

"Though it's a bit far away, our auras are very eye-catching, so we can't be careless."

According to Kyouko's divination, Kogure-san had left the Onmyou Agency and showed up at a hotel. Though they didn't know the specific time, it was definitely during the evening. So they didn't have much time.

"Do you think the other two are here too?"

"Miyoshi and Yamashiro? They didn't show up in the hotel, but it's extremely possible that they're acting together."

"Come to think of it, Kogure-san would act right away on his own when he was searching for Ohtomo-sensei."

"I wonder what the dark spot Kyouko was talking about is."

"It looks like she can't divine everything completely."

"Yeah, that's why we have to adapt to the situation."

"Yeah, this isn't a stadium. We can't make the slightest mistake."

"Okay, that goes for you too, Touji-kun."

They wanted to pull Kogure over to their side no matter what, but Natsume and the others' final target was Harutora.

The two of them stopped at the same time and stared ahead.

"Is...Is that Kogure-san!?"

"No, it's a Yase Doji! It's Kumomaru."

"Damn, we were a step late!"

I can't confirm it without looking, but I didn't spot Yamashiro's aura."

"Ah, what a bad development!"

"Hmm?"

If Kogure and Kumomaru were clashing, that meant he was opposing the Souma. And very few people in the Onmyou Agency knew of the existence of the Yase Doji.

"We have to help. If Kogure-san's there, we can definitely outclass the Yase Doji."

Just like Touji said, this was a great opportunity to strike a blow at the enemy's fighting power.

"Come on, hurry."

Natsume hastened her steps, but she suddenly stopped. Touji also stopped right away. He surveyed the surroundings and asked:

"What's up?"

"Sorry, I have a call."

"What? From Amami-san?"

"No, from Tenma-kun."

Could it be that Mystical Investigators had come to the warehouse.....

She couldn't ignore this. Natsume hastily answered the phone.

"Natsume-kun, are you there already?"

As expected, Tenma's voice was very panicked.

"We're almost there, we don't know the situation. Kogure-san seems to be fighting with the Yase Doji Kumomaru."

"Kogure-san? With a Yase Doji?"

"Yeah. That's why it's very urgent over here. What happened on your end?"

"Akino disappeared! I was wondering whether she went with you guys."

Natsume was stunned.

Touji gritted his teeth and said "That fool."

"Natsume, does Akino knows about that place?"

"If she heard our conversation....."

"Have you contacted Akino? Did you call her?"

But,

"Akino left her phone here!!"

"How could this happen?"

"Kyouko's performing divination, but she's not so familiar with Akino so it's very difficult. Suzuka-chan's chasing after her right now. She's heading towards you."

"Suzuka?"

Natsume stood there blankly. The phone fell from her hand and her body went slack, collapsing to the ground. Shocked, Touji hastily caught her. Natsume had already lost consciousness.

Natsume's body had suddenly stopped functioning.

Part 5

'I like your ears, Akino.'

Natsume, who had said that to her, had been Akino's first similarly-aged friend. They had been true friends who laughed together and helped each other.

During the incident when their Kichijoji hideout had been attacked, Akino had wanted to become Natsume's strength, but she had felt that she wasn't much help. Rather, she was a hindrance. As a result, it had been Harutora and his companions who had rescued Natsume.

Natsume was Akino's only friend.

But Akino felt that this wouldn't do.

The current Akino was different. Natsume had become Akino's friend.

So Akino had resolved to grow further. As Natsume's friend, she couldn't let her be humiliated.

No, Akino was the one who wanted to become a friend Natsume could rely on, like Natsume's other friends.

But reality was cruel. She hadn't been of any help. Instead, she had negatively influenced the entire team.

Feelings of inferiority awoke within her. Though Natsume was very gentle, Akino was just a useless individual.

So Akino didn't want to bring Natsume any further trouble. As long as Akino was there, she would make trouble for Natsume. So she at least wanted to help her out with one thing. She had to.

"It should be around here."

JR Ochanomizu Station.

If Akino's directions were accurate, then over there was the direction to Kichijoji. It had only been two or three days, but it felt like it had already been a long time. Were the captured Takahiro, Chizuru, and Yasuzumi alright? Amami had said that their lives would be spared, but they were definitely being treated harshly. But now wasn't the time to worry about others. She might get caught if she dropped her guard.

"Where's Akihabara? Over there? Then the hotel Natsume talked about should be there."

She recalled the operation details and started moving. Of course, she was using stealth magic.

"But I'm so worried about Natsume."

Something strange had happened to Natsume when she left. It had only been for a moment, but the circulation of her aura had stopped.

Natsume herself hadn't been so concerned about it. But Akino felt restless.

Akino hastened her steps. Natsume and Touji should be stealthed as well. It was very hard to find their auras. But considering Kyouko's divination, the two of them should be near the hotel, so she just needed to find that hotel.

"Hmm!? What!?"

Extremely large auras exploded out in front of her. Powerful magical energy collided forcefully.

Was someone fighting? It wasn't Natsume or Touji.

"What!?"

It was the shikigami from back then, no doubt about it!

What had happened? Was Natsume here too? That was for sure.

Just then, a taxi passed by across from her. Suzuka was in the backseat.

Why was that? Why had she chased her here?

Akino ran, hiding herself by crouching behind a vending machine.

Her stealth had vanished completely since she had sprinted with all her might, and her rabbit ears had materialized on her head. She hadn't thought she would be chased all the way here. Akino hadn't thought anyone would care about her. And to think it had been Suzuka. Though their ages were similar, Akino had trouble getting along with Suzuka.

"What should I do..."

She didn't have time to be confused here. She had to go to Natsume quickly. How should she apologize to Suzuka?

Suddenly, a voice that came from somewhere seemed to call out to her. Her rabbit ears extended and listened.

"Full Moon, can you hear"

Her rabbit ears twitched slightly as a reply. Akino also twitched a bit. She remembered this voice. It was the voice of that black-clothed boy, Tsuchimikado Harutora.

"What is it?"

A voice answered from above Akino's body.

It was the Full Moon.

What was going on? Akino seemed to sense another 'her'.

"Akino, you listen too. I'm Tsuchimikado Harutora, who you met before."

"Yeah."

"Right now I'm starting a magic ritual. Please help me with the strength of the Full Moon. I can't leave where I am right now, so I'll control you from a distance. Okay? Starting!"

Suddenly, a different scene appeared in Akino's mind.

It was an abandoned room.

Harutora was in front of her.

"Okay. Are you alone right now? Thanks, Akino. Accompany me for a while. I hope that you don't speak of this to anyone, especially Natsume. If she knew about this, it would have a negative effect on her."

"What's going on....."

"I'm starting. I don't know how much I can do controlling it from a distance. Raven's Wing, Full Moon, give me your strength."

"The Tsuchimikado Onmyoudou sect would like to address Taizan Fukun, the lord of the underworld."

Harutora chanted the incantation, showing a stern look. That look mesmerized Akino.

"The sun and moon illuminate one another here. I, Tsuchimikado Harutora, inherit the secret technique in the name of the Tsuchimikado family head."

Just then, the Raven's Wing and the Full Moon resonated. A powerful spiritual power floated between them.

"Gods....."

Harutora finished chanting a long incantation.

"Ancestral spirits, grant me guidance through the afterlife!"

Chapter 5 - Interweaving Travels

Part 1

Allegedly, there was a secret Onmyoudou book written by Abe no Seimei.

It was the 'Gathered Legends of the Yatagarasu and Moon Rabbit'. A legendary book that everyone related to magic had more or less heard of.

But the transcript circulated after his death had actually been compiled from multiple sources, and the five-chapter book clearly had some contents that had been filled in after his death. One example of this was that the name of the chief compiler was '晴明' rather than '清明'[6].

But that was all just common knowledge. The Tsuchimikado family had actually handed the secret magic left behind by their ancestor Abe no Seimei down through generations.

But it wasn't in the form of a 'book'.

"Do you understand?"

Harutora did his best to elicit a reply. As expected, it was tough to set up a stable 'space' between the Raven's Wing and Full Moon when they were so far apart. More importantly, the aura from 'him' remaining in Yakou was too thin a thousand years later. Yakou had placed his spiritual power and magic symbols into the Raven's Wing in order to maintain 'his' aura and placed his intelligence and personality into the Full Moon. In other words, it was basically impossible to communicate with the Full Moon unless it was near him. Even so, Harutora still focused his mind and attempted to fathom the returning signal.

"What should I do? She's almost at her limits already, and I don't know when her connection with Hokuto will break. No, even if I do something, Tokyo's spiritual state will instantly be overturned once the Souma decide to start carrying out their plan, and she won't be able to stand it in that state."

He had to find a way to save Natsume. No matter what, he had to find a way somewhere that would save the currently 'distorted' Natsume. He had to find that way!

.....Even if he couldn't fix Natsume's abnormal state, Harutora would grab at anything that could prolong Natsume's current longevity. Harutora had been resolved to step onto the path of true Onmyoudou and sacrifice half of his life for the resurrection ritual in the first place when he had called back Natsume's soul with the Taizan Fukun Ritual.

"Please grant me instruction. Please!"

But Harutora's wish wasn't answered.

There is no other way..... than the theory of yin and yang.....

The momentary whisper made Harutora tightly grit his teeth as he restrained himself.

The megalomaniacal lecture he had given Yashamaru several days ago surfaced in his mind. Just like the one he had once given Suzuka.

---

[6] Both are pronounced Seimei, but are obviously different.

Even so, he couldn't give up.

Even if he had to rely on witchcraft or demons, he couldn't give up here.

"Is it really impossible to do anything without stepping into the theory of yin and yang!? Any way at all.....!"

Harutora waited with for a reply, holding his breath because of his overwhelming, runaway thoughts. A few seconds of time seemed as long as several days.

.....You can..... only..... make amends.....

"Amends?"

Send her soul..... to me.....

He suddenly felt as if his whole body had frozen. "I refuse." He immediately replied. "You want me to have Natsume die? I can't do that. Even if I violate the theory of yin and yang, I won't do that!"

Harutora didn't receive a response to his anger. He just received a calm message saying this wasn't the case.

Amend..... everything happening now.....

The conversation with 'him' happened via thoughts rather than words. He had to transform the ideas of the 'space' he had managed to make into words. Alongside that difficulty, Harutora didn't know whether he had correctly grasped the meaning of what had been conveyed to him. He asked again, "Amend everything? What do you mean?"

However, in that moment, the space started making a sharp noise.

"No!?"

It seemed like something had happened around Akino. No, the 'space' he had forcefully constructed had been about to reach its limits anyway in Tokyo's spirit flow disturbed from the 'god summoning'.

Are you..... listening? .....It's..... not..... not there.....

"Seimei-sama!"

.....time.

Harutora did his best to safeguard the final thought that came from the rapidly-crumbling Taizan Fukun Ritual.

"Hey, what's wrong with you!?"

She was suddenly grabbed from behind and spun around. "What were you thinking!? Do you understand what the situation is right now!? This isn't your individual problem!"

This time both her shoulders were grabbed and she was shaken forcefully. Even so, Akino's consciousness didn't recover immediately.

"......Huh? Akino?"

She stopped, feeling that something was wrong. Akino finally came to her senses. Her eyes focused on the girl glaring at her.

"......Wait. Just now, that was..... magic? And judging by the spirit, that was the 'Full Moon', right? What were you doing?"

"Oh no..... Natsume, she - Natsume's going to die! Just now, that..... And she's going to decay if this goes on!?"

"H-Hold on! Calm down first. What's been wrong with you recently!?"

"It was Harutora-kun just now!"

"Hah!?"

Becoming more and more confused, Suzuka instantly tensed up after hearing Harutora's name. She grabbed Akino again.

"......The Full Moon was summoned, huh. What did that idiot use the Full Moon for?"

"U-Um! I couldn't hear his voice, but I felt that Harutora-kun was talking with someone! .....He said that Natsume will be in a lot of danger if this goes on! Also, Harutora-kun asked how to save Natsume, it seems like things aren't going smoothly....."

Suzuka listened while muttering "Magic, huh?".

"What's the deal? Didn't that Bakatora resurrect Natsume once? With the Taizan Fukun Ritual?"

"It seemed like he said that was no good....."

"No good..... It was a failure?"

"I-I don't know. I never heard anything like this before, but Harutora-kun said that Natsume had another soul....."

Suddenly, Akino thought of Harutora's promise and her mouth stopped as her body froze. Seeing Suzuka's suspicious face, she hastily explained, "D-Don't say that to Natsume! Harutora-kun said that if Natsume knew this, it might have a negative effect on her, h-he told me not to tell anyone.....!"

"Hah? You spilled everything just now."

"......!?"

Akino's face reddened and tears started welling up below her glasses.

Why was she so useless?

She wanted to be useful. She wanted to be Natsume's reliable friend. She had always desired this, but everything she did was unnecessary, insignificant, or a blunder. She hated that. It shamed her so much she wanted to cry.

Feelings of inferiority filled her chest. She felt so bad she wanted to die. But,

"Hmph. I see."

Suzuka put her hand on Akino's head with a plop. Akino closed her eyes out of fear, her body stiffening up.

But Suzuka's actions weren't violent. Rather - they were so gentle that she couldn't believe it.

She gently stroked her head between her ears. That movement was gentle enough to raise her spirits. Akino opened her eyes in surprise. Suzuka looked away, the corners of her eyes slightly red.

"......Y-You're not mad?"

"Hah? Mad about what?'

"Um..... for running here alone a-and troubling you and the others....."

"Are you stupid? Of course I'm incredibly mad. Also, I hate people like you who do things sloppily."

Completely merciless. The fact that she didn't berate her excessively actually gave her the sense that these were her true feelings, which made it hurt even more. But.

"......You don't want to just sit around on standby, right?'

"Eh?"

"You have to do something yourself - that's what you think, right? And you're hoping that others will recognize you, right?"

"....."

"In that case, there's nothing wrong with it."

"...!"

She inadvertently doubted whether she had heard wrongly. Her eyes jumped up as she looked straight at Suzuka.

"I wanted to do something stupid once before too, and ended up getting stopped by Bakatora and Natsume. But they didn't deny me as a person. In other words, um..... it's not your fault? Well, th-that's basically it. Even I wanted them to recognize me as soon as possible."

"....."

She had an inexplicable feeling.

Suzuka was a Divine General. A star of the magic community called the 'Child Prodigy' that even a nameless youngster like Akino had heard about in the temple. A young, brilliant idol that everyone striving to be an Onmyouji yearned to be like. Even though she's younger, she's acting an adult and extending a hand to my useless self. At this moment, she looked so much like a normal girl.

Akino timidly grasped Suzuka's hand. It was a small hand, like her own. The moment she grasped the hand, Akino seemed to sense Suzuka become relieved.

"Then let's go back. For now, we'll send Natsume a message."

She fiddled with her phone in one hand as she spoke. She was probably embarrassed. Akino also became inadvertently embarrassed, but she still didn't intend to let go of Suzuka's hand.

Just then, Akino's rabbit ears turned behind her. It seemed like they had noticed something. Akino turned her head around.

Down the slope stood a girl whose long shadow stretched from her feet.

She was a delicate and pretty androgynous girl who could momentarily be mistaken to be a boy. An archaistic air showed from beneath her cool expression, and she gave off an unearthly, mysterious presence just by standing there.

The most striking thing about her was her red hair. Her red hair swayed against the background of the setting sun like a burning flame.

The girl looked at them. Then,

"...Suzuka?"

An irrepressible joy showed from her slightly surprised voice.

Akino instinctively grasped Suzuka's hand tighter at her words.

"To think I'd be able to run into you here. What a surprise."

The girl continued speaking to them. Thinking that she was someone acquainted with Suzuka, Akino recalled the matter of the 'red-haired girl' that she had heard about a few times.

That's right. Natsume and the others had talked about her. She remembered her name was Souma--

"Takiko.....!?"

Suzuka stared at the girl, almost speechless from shock. But the red-haired girl smiled tenderly at Suzuka.

Part 2

The 'Divine Sword' had entered a magic battle on the street.

After receiving the emergency report, the Mystical Investigators instantly moved out in full force, with all their members rushing to the scene. The Exorcist Bureau also sent out an urgent communication telling exorcists to move out.

But in that hubbub, Yamashiro and Miyoshi stayed on standby at the Mystical Investigator's Bureau. In particular, Yamashiro sat in his chair flipping the pages of the small paperback book in his hand like nothing was going on. Using a tone like someone asking if he was going to answer that ringing phone, he asked Yamashiro, "......Is it alright to not go?"

But Yamashiro, who was just the opposite of Miyoshi and restless in his seat, angrily said, "Didn't I say? Chief Kurahashi gave the order that we were to standby at the Mystical Investigator's Bureau!"

"A standby order..... Did he give any reasons?"

"None."

"Why?"

"No, even if you ask me....."

Not expecting to have this asked back of him, Yamashiro was silent for a while. Miyoshi looked down, too lazy to even raise his head as he said: "It was an order, right? If you normally don't ask for the rationale behind an order..... If you just blindly obey without understanding why the order was given, you'll never in a hundred years climb up to a position where you give orders, you know? Also, as a Mystical Investigator, you can't just give up thinking because they don't tell you." He turned another page.

"......The opponent fighting with Kogure-shi..... He appeared in Ogikubo before. Could he be Tsuchimikado Harutora!?"

"No, it's not him. It's someone else who fought against him at the time." Miyoshi smiled wryly, but that wry smile was mocking. "In other words, Kogure-shi's currently fighting against an enemy of Tsuchimikado Harutora."

Yamashiro was momentarily speechless. He looked blankly at Miyoshi and only uttered words after a long while.

"......Are you saying Kogure's betrayed the Onmyou Agency.....?"

"Even so, I'm less interested in that fact and more in his 'reason'. After all, it's that Kogure..... But....." Miyoshi avoided Yamashiro's gaze and his words became vague.

"......What is that 'reason'?"

Miyoshi didn't respond. He asked again,

"You reported to Chief Kurahashi that we weren't able to contact Kogure after getting his message, right? Kogure only ordered us to standby after learning that Kogure was acting independently. Right?"

"....."

The conversation of questions responding to questions continued. But it wasn't like they couldn't communicate. In contrast, the two of them both obtained answers from the other's silence.

Part 3

Directly purifying him was meaningless. He had to capture him.

It was extremely difficult to catch a shikigami against its will. But it wasn't impossible.

Amidst the blood-red sunset, night and day exchanged places and yin and yang revolved. Omagatoki[7].

"You must already understand my intentions." Kogure said.

"Mostly." Kumomaru answered.

"You don't need to reply. I don't have so much time that I'd debate with a shikigami."

"......You're not asking anything? Exactly how much do you know?"

"I basically know nothing. But with my personality, I can't rest unless I see for myself. Mutobe - no, it's better to call you Kumomaru. Let me properly confirm how much was hiding behind your appearance of a terrorist and Yakou fanatic."

Right as the words left his mouth, a huge spiritual energy burst from Kogure's body. He stepped forth, moving close, drawing his sword, and readying himself for a straight slash at lightning speed.

Kumomaru crossed his arms in front of him to block. The mighty sword strike and torrent of magical energy entirely engulfed Kumomaru and raged inside the room. An incredibly overpowering hurricane instantly smashed the hotel's decorations into fragments, and the window in front of the sword strike was blown away along with the outer wall.

In the next moment, Kogure cut open the dust storm and rushed straight through, jumping down from the window to pursue.

This was the twenty-second floor. Without paying any heed to the dusk scenery or perturbed by the shockwaves, he swung his blade again straight towards Kumomaru below.

The second slash.

Without time to even dodge, Kumomaru took the strike head-on and hurtled to the ground like a meteor, sending up another wave of dust.

"You're stronger than I anticipated." Kogure uttered coldly. The materialized Kumomaru stood steadily on the rubble of his landing point. He knew with one 'look' that the damage he had done was far lighter than he had expected.

To capture a shikigami, one first had to whittle away their spiritual power bit by bit and then bind them with magic. Naturally, the stronger a shikigami's spiritual power, the more difficult capturing it would be.

"It looks like this will take some effort." He murmured as he raised his blade and continued attacking. But Kumomaru didn't flee. Instead, he dodged the blade head-on--

"Haaaaaaahhh!"

The sword danced. As sword techniques split the air, Kumomaru's speed became faster and faster, dodging every slash. More and more slashes cut nothing but air. Kogure inadvertently clicked his tongue.

---

[7] The moment at dusk when the sky grows dark. Supposedly, this is when evil spirits attempt to enter the world.

A human's speed couldn't possibly catch up to a shikigami's in the first place, which was why he needed to discharge magical energy into his surroundings and increase the spiritual pressure, slowing down the shikigami's actions as if the force of gravity had increased. But Kogure had been constantly putting out a great deal of magical energy, yet in contrast, Kumomaru seemed completely unaffected. His expressions didn't change as he confronted Kogure's blade amidst the shockwaves of his slashes.

It was unexpected for him to have this much power. The moment after Kogure thought this, Kumomaru deflected Kogure's attack and struck out with his leg. This was a blow filled with spiritual power, just like Kogure’s slashes. Kogure also gathered his spiritual power and parried the kick.

Bang. The impact went straight to his bones, and he inadvertently backed up a step.

As expected, he was no pushover. Powerful strength, with keen and calm movements. But.....

...Could it be?

"I'm surprised myself."

Kumomaru suddenly said. Kogure took a stance and guarded. "I experienced the power of the 'Divine Blade' two years ago. To be able to fight until now..... I might not have been able a few days ago."

".....What does that mean?"

"Look forward to it. Look forward to what I'll show you next."

His suspicion became reality. "What are you trying? You should know without me having to tell you, buying time will just be disadvantageous for you."

He had to escape or defeat Kogure. Since he didn't intend to escape, then it could be seen that he wanted to defeat Kogure. But he had just been defending and dodging the whole time before and hadn't taken the initiative to attack. It would be even harder for him to get away when reinforcements arrived.

Was he going to use someone from the reinforcements as a hostage? It was still suspicious. This guy had avoided showing himself in front of others as much as possible, so why was there suddenly no more reason for him to hide himself?

As if seeing through Kogure's suspicions, Kumomaru leisurely gathered magical energy.

".....It's starting. 嗡 牛头 谛咧 誓愿 随喜 延命 娑嗢呿!"

".....! You!?"

Yin magical energy poured from the earth and the balance of the five elements fell apart. Phase Two..... Phase Three.....

Twisted bestial spiritual disasters appeared alongside the third phase. And there were four of them.

"'Type-Chimera'!?"

Nue.

The same kind as Kumomaru had used in the spiritual disaster terrorist attack two years ago. But this time, Kumomaru had created Phase Threes right here without any kind of preparation beforehand.....!?

"Go!" At Kumomaru's order, the Nue opened their maws and rushed forward.

Part 4

The concepts of time and space were distorting.

In her delusion, sound and light, aura and time, melded together as one.

She lost her five senses, and the boundary line between her and the world became ambiguous. Slowly, the meaning of 'her own' presence became vague as well.

Her soul wandered to the other side.

She was one with the world.

Then all of a sudden, a light.

A golden point of light appeared. The point of light flowed, extended, and carved out a majestic ribbon.

The ribbon of light wrapped around 'Natsume', clarifying the boundary line between 'Natsume' and the world. 'She' formed self-consciousness as she was excised out, and Natsume came to her senses.

The ribbon of light pulled strongly on Natsume. It pulled her to the place she had originally been - her body.

It seemed like she heard a voice.

A very nostalgic voice.

Natsume!

Shouted awake, Natsume opened her eyes.

A very familiar teenage boy was staring at her in her blurry field of vision. Where was this? Her brain couldn't work. Her body couldn't move as she wanted it to either. She felt like she was separated from the entire world. Could this be a waking dream?

Then, a voice kind of like 'wake up' came from inside her. A voice she had been hearing just before.

A very nostalgic voice.

"......Hokuto? Incense? No more?"

But that voice slowly grew distant until she could no longer hear it. It became one with the golden light and vanished into the magic.

.....Magic?

"......!"

Natsume's eyes focused back on reality.

"Natsume!" It had been Touji in front of her calling to her. Seeing that Natsume had woken up, Touji breathed a sigh of relief. "Great, I was wondering what happened to you. Your aura stopped completely for almost a minute, it almost scared me to death."

"......One minute?"

"Yeah. Nothing about the situation has changed. Rather, what was going on just now?"

...What had happened? Hokuto? And at the end, it had said.....

Incense. Right, it had said 'there's no more incense'. What did that mean? And what did 'incense' refer to--

When she had thought this far, Natsume and Touji looked in the same direction. The direction of Kogure and Kumomaru's battle.

"That's.....!"

"'Type-Chimeras'!"

That's right, Nue. Exactly like two years ago.

"First seal, release!"

Touji released his seal and became a living spirit. Immediately after, Natsume said, "I'll go too!".

"Uh..... Got it! But remember not to use your draconic aura!" Touji controlled his demonic aura, picked up Natsume, and rushed to the battleground.

"Go!"

The Nue leaped to attack Kogure at Kumomaru's order.

As far as Kogure knew, only ara-mitama like Ashiya Doman could control just-formed spiritual disasters like this.

"Interesting." Kogure formed a seal with his empty left hand.

The Nue still rushed fiercely at him, but they turned into dust in the next second.

"Wha--!"

The dharani[8] of Bishamonten[9]. Partially-materialized aura surrounded Kogure, and the Nue that his blade cut across were purified without spurting out miasma. Kumomaru clicked his tongue and formed four more Nue. But just like before, the group of Nue attacking like a wave were cut apart by Kogure's sword.

"...Why don't you stop that?"

In an instant, taking advantage of an opening in the group of Nue, Kogure broke out of their surround and pointed his blade at Kumomaru--

"On bishibishi karakara shibari sowaka!"

He heard an incantation that almost came from next to his ears.

...Damn!

He only remembered now. Back then, there had been two shikigami confronting Harutora.

A number of seals overlapped before his eyes and his body was bound by jet-black fog.

"Miyachi-kun might get mad if we just killed you. We won't take your life here - it's too early for you to die."

A young voice. All he could see through the black fog was a monocle.

I knew for sure that you would act after we made the attack announcement. I was truly relieved when I got the information that you were acting independently. Ahh, right, just like Mutobe-kun, I go by the name Yashamaru now."

Right as the words left his mouth, the magic bound Kogure's consciousness completely.

Clunk. His sword dropped to the ground.

"How....."

Natsume and Touji hid on a rooftop to the side and witnessed everything.

...They hadn't made it in time.

Natsume and Touji had arrived at a great opportunity, when Kogure was single-handedly fighting the group of Nue. If not for Yashamaru's ambush, they definitely could have won. The mighty spiritual power from before was now completely imperceptible, as if it had been an illusion.

...If I hadn't fainted before...

---

[8] Something like a mantra.
[9] Japanese name for Vaisravana, the chief of the Four Heavenly Kings in Buddhism.

They had been a tiny bit late. If only Natsume hadn't fainted along the way, she and Touji would have been able to successfully make it in time, the battle would have ended in Kogure's victory, and he would have been able to join them.

...Because of me.....!

She was incredibly regretful.

"I don't believe it..... The Yase Doji are clearly much stronger than before. Though they were also powerful back then, I could have at least fought against them. Now....." Though Touji's tone was calm, his expression was pale. "'You guys are no good'..... huh." He gritted his teeth and murmured.

"Anyways, we should first withdraw and meet up with Suzuka and Akino."

Right. Though it pained her to leave Kogure, she needed to ensure the safety of her friends. Natsume took out her phone and was about to contact Suzuka when she received a message. It was from Suzuka. She said that she had succeeded in meeting up with Akino.

"No sense in hanging around. Let's go."

Touji left the battleground carrying Natsume. At the end, she took one look, praying to herself.

...Sorry. Please, be sure not to die.....

Soon afterwards, Natsume got the second message.

Part 5

"Souma Takiko.....!?"

Suzuka doubted her own eyes.

The last time she had met Takiko had been last month - no, it had been two months ago. She hadn't come to the research lab since Suzuka got her hands on the information about the spiritual disaster terrorist attack. They hadn't seen each other for a long time.

But it was really strange.

She knew it was Takiko, but inadvertently, she asked, "...Who are you?"

Without a doubt, it was Souma Takiko standing there downhill. Her androgynous and beautiful features, her steady standing posture, and her bright red hair were all evidence of Souma Takiko.

But she was different. There were things that were different from the Takiko of before. She couldn't say where, but her instinct warned her.

"It's been a while, huh. I haven't been able to see you for a long time. And..... I thought I wouldn't be able to see you again. I didn't think we'd be able to meet this soon, like Chief Kurahashi said. I'm so happy."

Something was still wrong.....

...Calm down..... Suzuka breathed deeply, organizing the current situation. They had to escape, even if only Akino could make it. They couldn't let the Full Moon fall into enemy hands. ...Ha, it was like she wanted to play a hero. But the situation was urgent, and first off, they had to.....

She stood in front of Akino and slowly moved her hand behind her.

"......What are you doing here?" She spoke to Takiko.

"The normal 'special training'. Didn't you know? It's close by."

"......Meaning that you've already dealt with the other business?"

"Hmph. I'm not with those annoyances today. I finally got to go out and walk around."

"By yourself?"

"Yeah."

Takiko affirmed naively and innocently. But Suzuka had a flash of inspiration.

'Those annoyances' couldn't refer to Onmyou Agency men, it had to be her defensive shikigami Yashamaru and Kumomaru. There wasn't any strange aura nearby, and although it was possible that they were stealthed, Takiko didn't lie.

...It could work.

She had already confirmed Takiko's power from her mock battle with Natsume in the Onmyou Academy. She didn't know how much it had risen after her 'special training', but she was confident that she could at least succeed in running away.

Hold on, this might be a big opportunity. If she was able to capture the Souma clan's shaman princess - no, that wouldn't do. If she captured her, 'they' would immediately notice--

Then, shouldn't she just kill her?

The thought that momentarily flashed through her made Suzuka uneasy.

Takiko letting the Raven's Wing go out of control had been the direct cause of Natsume's death. That gave Suzuka enough reason to make her decision here.

But.....

...'I'm so happy'.

Suzuka knew that not one bit of her smile as she spoke those words had been false. Suzuka knew that she had been Takiko's only conversation partner during her two years of imprisoned life. Suzuka knew that Takiko was even worse at making jokes and even less worldly than her, and that she would keep at the card game she liked for entire nights. Suzuka knew all of that.

...Ugh.....

'Affection'.

The word that Kumomaru had freely said before was now truly binding Suzuka. The second-class magic they had applied to Suzuka for a year and a half used the 'heart' rather than the 'mind'. It was now impeding Suzuka's actions.

"....."

"Those are pretty ears." Takiko's gaze moved away from Suzuka as she broke the silence.

Uh oh. She clearly felt panic from Akino's hand that she held on to. Akino's ears were still showing, and now she couldn't conceal them even if she hid them back away.

"Are you also from the Souma clan like Yashamaru said? Maybe we three Souma girls gathered here thanks to our ancestors' guidance. How nice."

That moment, Suzuka noticed exactly what she had been feeling strange about since before.

...This girl..... almost had no emotions!?

Takiko had originally been a plenty emotional girl, but the emotions of the Takiko in front of her now almost never changed. She had lost her 'pitiable' feeling too. Was it because of the 'god summoning'.....!?

"Hey, Suzuka." She spoke in a voice that seemed to reverberate in her mind like a bell. "I don't really want to part with you..... Do you want to come back/ I like you. I won't force you to help us, just stay with me....."

Suzuka couldn't reply. The mysterious pressure behind Takiko's back pressed down on Suzuka and constantly increased her restlessness. Her mental state started becoming unstable.

Just then,

"We're Natsume's friends!"

Akino jumped out from behind her with a shout, then hid back behind Suzuka's back.

Suzuka's pressure from before vanished as if she had been smacked awake.

"Even I....." In contrast, Takiko's expression twisted when she heard those words. Anger, regret, and sadness. The expressions of the Takiko who Suzuka knew surfaced again.

On the other hand, Takiko's spiritual power that she could 'see' was swelling erratically.

That moment.

"Akino! Suzuka!"

A dragon and an oni. Voices came from the sky. She knew by sensing the spiritual power and didn't need to look.

"Natsume! Touji!"

Leaping past a stone wall, Touji jumped down carrying Natsume.

"Akino! Suzuka!"

They had just received the second message. As she dropped from the sky, Natsume saw Suzuka's phone in Akino's hand. Suzuka had probably secretly given Akino the phone behind her back while drawing Takiko

into a conversation. Not only did the message say their location, but it had also told them that Takiko didn't have any shikigami with her right now.

"Here's our chance! Yashamaru and Kumomaru won't be able to do anything as long as we have control over their master!" Natsume jumped down from Touji's arms as she said this and surrounded Takiko with Suzuka and Touji.

"Order!"

The flame scattered by the fire-element charm surrounded Takiko instantly, and at the same time Touji rushed forward with a speed that broke apart the ground he stepped on. They would fight and win as quickly as possible!

But--

Touji's speed dropped and he kneeled onto the road, groaning. His seal had indeed been released, his horns and fangs were very visible, and there was no problem with the demonic aura that covered him in the form of samurai armor. It was the same living spirit form as always. But all Touji could do was crouch on the ground groaning. Natsume and Suzuka panicked when they saw this.

"How dangerous."

Despair instantly dyed her thoughts.

The figures of two shikigami appeared on the slope behind Natsume and the others. Yashamaru and Kumomaru.

"Ato Touji-kun? Did you forget what I said before? That you were the same kind as us? That you obtained the 'same kind of protection'?"

"You..... What are you saying....."

The Yase Doji laughed coldly. "Did you even forget how you became a living spirit? The oni in your body is none other than the one I summoned during the Great Hinamatsuri Purification four years ago. As for which one it is, you shouldn't need me to elaborate."

...How.....

"You can't touch the princess with your strength."

"Damn..... What the hell.....! Third seal, release!!"

Touji bellowed and demonic power spurted forth like a geyser, covering his entire body. Touji got up on one knee. He stood up with all the power in his body.

But that was it. Takiko looked somewhat sorrowfully down at Touji, who couldn't rise past supporting himself on one knee.

"Do you understand now?" Yashamaru laughed coldly. "Check."

They had been checked. As soon as these two shikigami returned, they no longer had any chance of winning. They couldn't even escape.

Checkmate.

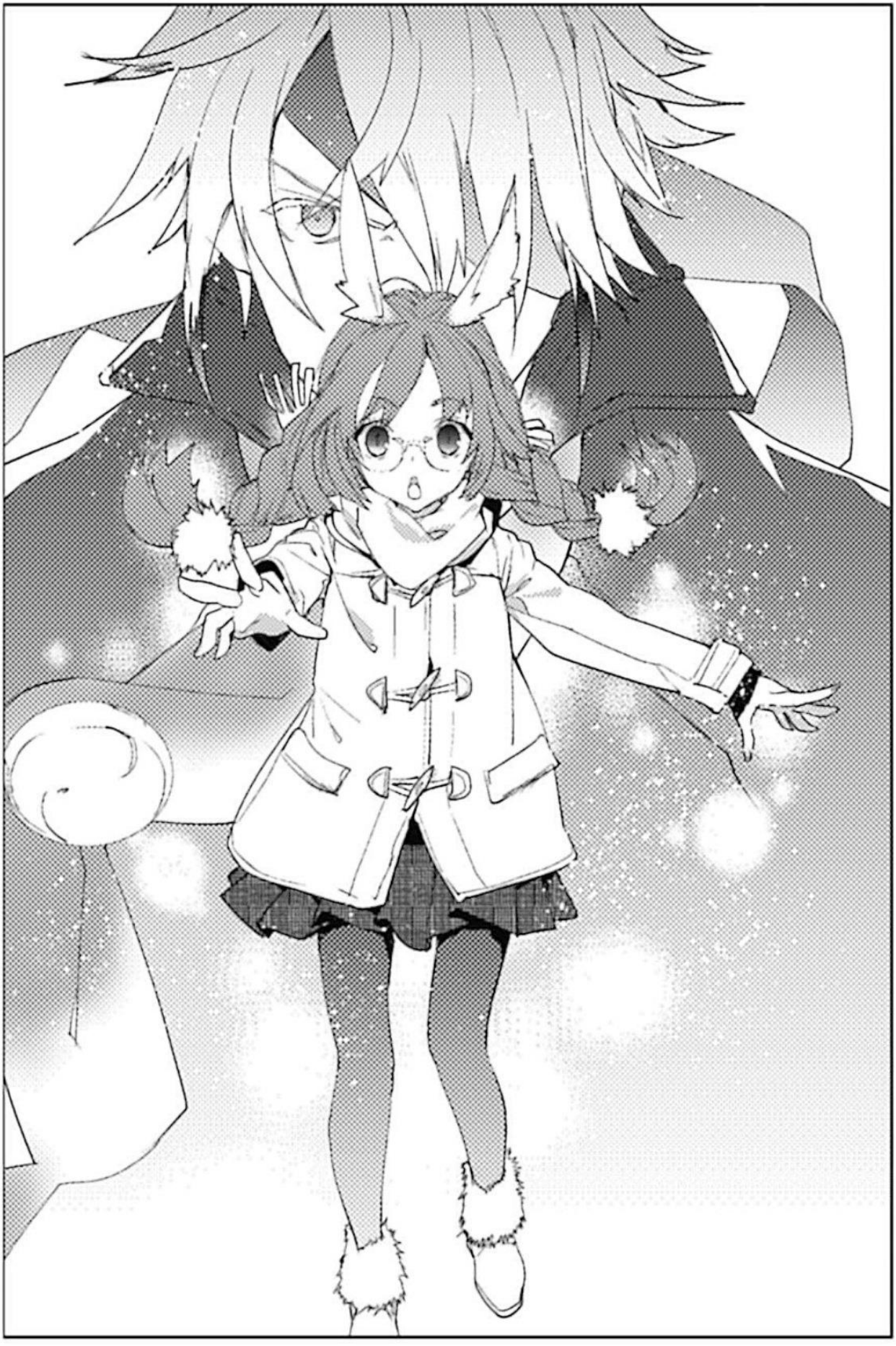
Suzuka and Natsume could do nothing more than stand still dumbly.

"Okay!" Akino suddenly cried out. "Don't worry! Please start!"

Pale white light gathered by Akino's rabbit ears. "Touji, reseal right away! Natsume, Suzuka, stand together!"

Akino shouted. It was Akino's voice, yet wasn't Akino's voice.

Everyone present stared in surprise. Because everyone was familiar with that voice.



"Harutora-kun!?"

At the same time, Akino started stepping at high speed. A complicated and precise pattern of steps was instantly completed nine times with the speed of the moon rabbit.

Far Step.

"Kumomaru!" Yashamaru cried out and simultaneously shot his spiritual power into the ground.

Far Step, an instant movement method using the spirit flow. They couldn't let them escape like this!

But Akino's target wasn't Natsume and the others gathered here.

"...Damn!" The two shikigami hastily flew to their master. But Akino had grabbed Takiko a step before them.

"...Natsume, sorry."

Those last words were in Akino's voice.

Right as the words left their mouth, Akino, Takiko, Yashamaru, and Kumomaru were sucked into the spirit flow.

The moment the Full Moon entered the spirit flow, the connection with the Raven's Wing was cut off and Harutora’s consciousness returned to his body.

He could only have sacrificed Akino. It pained him to give up the Full Moon he had finally managed to obtain, but the opponents also knew about this and wouldn't harm Akino.

But without the Full Moon, he would have no way of performing the Taizan Fukun Ritual again to call on 'him'. His clues for rescuing Natsume ended here.

And though he had disguised the spiritual power that he had provided for Far Step, the Onmyou Agency had probably noticed already. He would have to change locations again.

"Hishamaru, how is it?"

"It's already stabilized."

"Understood. I don't want to move, but we have no choice. Prepare the next hideout."

"Harutora." Kakugyouki called out from behind his master while Harutora suppressed his emotions.

There was no response. Harutora just gritted his teeth hard.

"At this point....." His voice was like a growl. "We've already used up all our strategies. So there's nothing left to be confused about - destroy the Souma, defeat the Onmyou Agency, rescue Akino, and save Natsume. I definitely won't give up."

His voice was flat, but his harsh, one-eyed gaze burned like magma, frightening those who saw it.

The sun had already set, and the flames of the few candles left in the room were all that provided illumination.

The flickering, dying firelight and the comparatively overwhelming darkness. The Onmyouji stared into nothingness as if begrudging himself.